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MARIO MONTANARI

LE OPERAZIONI  
IN AFRICA  
SETTENTRIONALE

VOL. III - EL ALAMEIN

*(Gennaio - Novembre 1942)*

ROMA 1989





GENERAL STAFF OF THE ARMY  
HISTORICAL OFFICE

MARIO MONTANARI

THE OPERATIONS IN NORTH AFRICA  
VOL. III -EL Alamein  
(January -November 1942)

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## PRESENTATION

Following the two-volume "Sidi Barrani" and "Tobruk" is now published "El Alamein", the third dedicated to the war in North Africa in the years 1940-1943.

As expressed by the significant title, it is the culmination of the struggle held overseas by Italian-German troops against those of the British Commonwealth. On the one hand Rommel, now legendary; the other first Auchinleck and then Montgomery.

For a moment, the victory seemed within reach of the "Axis", but was soon to be recognized that the boldness and ruthlessness - alone - could not overcome the difficulties and obstacles to the operations of a insufficient logistics.

And if in the late spring of 1942 the dilemma of Malta or Tobruk was resolved in favor of this fortress-but with more of a mental reservation on the part of some protagonists - in July, before the positions of the close of El Alamein, fell illusions and began a bitter regret for the abandonment of the proposed transaction while C 3. Regrets that will surface in any consideration of the conduct of the war theater in the Mediterranean and that will originate a long series of controversies and criticism.

However, it is true that, beyond the polemics and criticisms posthumously - as useless, since no verification, as speculative, and therefore an end in itself - the combination El Alamein (on the African front) and Stalingrad (on the Eastern Front) constituted a watershed in the conflict between the strategic initiative of the "Axis", which ran aground here, and that the Allies, there was here confidence and vigor.

The study of General Montanari - to which the Historical Office expresses its gratitude - is very accurate and, albeit eminently based on official documentation of the opposing belligerent, it shall take due account of the reports and the memories of the protagonists at the various levels.

Emphasize the importance of the battle of El Alamein is superfluous, given its enormous resonance and -as I said - its outstanding and recognized strategic consequences. We lost, but, as the acute analysis made by the author emphasizes, we lost honorably. We can talk about it with heads held high.

CHIEF OF THE HISTORICAL OFFICE



## CONVENTIONAL SIGNS

used in sketches

Were employed unit markings currently in use by the Italian army, namely:

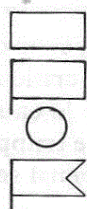
## 1. Basic Symbols

Unit

Command

Logistical Institution

Logistical Command



## 2. Arms Symbols

Infantry

Mechanized Infantry

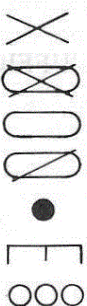
Armor

Armored Cavalry

Artillery

Engineers

Motorized Troops



## 3. Status Symbols

Army

Corp

Division

Brigade



Regiment

Battalion or Group


Company or Battery



To indicate a complex tactical using the symbol above the symbol of rank

## 4. Indication of the units

To the left of the base symbol has the numeric code corresponding to the symbol represented rank and unit code right where you placed the Department in question.

Es. 2  5 Indicates II Bn. of the 5th Inf. Rgt.

## 5. Indication of nationality

Where necessary, to the right of the symbol are used the abbreviations IT: Italy; Ge: Germany; UK: United Kingdom; AU: Australia; NZ: New Zealand; FR: France; Po: Poland.



Translators notes:

*I would like to take a moment to clarify this work. I do not claim authorship and this is a translation done with software designed for that task, while I did proof read through the work, something's remained unclear. The software chooses the most common usage for a word, while the author may have meant something else. This work is written for a college level reading skills, plus there are often cultural references or idem which I often miss. Also the text is full of spelling mistakes, likely due to poor proof reading of the original work or where the printer dropped or added a letter. As well as my difficulty with Italian word endings which in Italian indicate who's taking actions or a about who the action refers. I think I compensated well, but it was a learning experience, so I got better as the work progressed. Or I hope so.*

\*\*\*

*I have retained the Italian command titles, for example using Comando Supremo instead of Supreme Command. All the powers had their own supreme commands so it was easier to identify which supreme command is being referred to when it's in that countries language, besides it meaning obvious. Below the Supreme Command there were various high commands or Comando Superior. These were the supreme regional command, and I used the Italian language version. Also please remember the Italian Armed Forces at this time are also "Royal" forces. So the "R" before the command symbolizes this. To be clear R. Esercito (Royal Army), R. Aeronautica (Royal Air Force), R. Marina (Royal Navy). So I used the Italian form so not to confuse them with their British counterparts.*

*I also retained the Italian forms of place names. Since I used the drawing from the books, I needed to retain the names used in the text for clarity. This applies mostly to town names, while countries, islands and famous locations used common English, hoping that same notoriety would impart clarity.*

*Robert M Denny Jr.  
December 2015*

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## **Chapter One**

### **THE OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK IN JANUARY 1942**

#### **1. THE POLITICAL - MILITARY SITUATION**

1941 was closed with the entry of Japan and the stunning series of its successes in the Pacific and in Southeast Asia, so resounding as to cause euphoria of Mussolini and close our eyes to reality. After the sudden attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt asked Congress for war only on Japan. On 11 December, Mussolini, in response to the specific request made by the Japanese Ambassador a week earlier, and at the same time as Hitler, announced from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia his decision to declare war on the United States. To be honest, they were already actively posts alongside the Great Britain since at least the previous 27 May, when Roosevelt proclaimed the State of unlimited national emergency, however now fell every delay.

If the Japanese could keep triumphs on the emotion of the man in the street, in theatres of operation in which the axis was busy things went bad. In Russia the German Blitzkrieg had missed the goal. Narrow, but had missed. And the Soviet counter-offensive began. The severity of the strategic trends of the campaign had appeared throughout the 18 December, when Hitler had removed from Office the Marshal von Brauchitsch, Commander-in-Chief of the army, and assumed command in person. In North Africa, the Italian-German forces were arrested at the western end of Cyrenaica and it seemed that for the moment there was no more to be done. Also in the occupied countries, the situation left something to be desired: the Croatia appeared agitated, Montenegro in turmoil, Albania unhappy.

In the front, so to speak, giving best marks. The appointment of twenty-six Vidussoni secretary of national fascist party (December 26, 1941) had raised sarcastic comments everywhere. In September had been set the ration card for almost all foodstuffs. The measure was perfectly logical and reasonable, being a nation at war, and already from previous year you would have to take, but it is known that Mussolini had not wanted to purposely give the country feeling the hardness of the conflict, which will leave amazed Mar. Kesselring upon his arrival in Italy:

"The operations were conducted by Rome, but Italy never resented too the consequences of war. I had the impression that the war was not taken too seriously by many Italians who felt not quite their responsibility to combat soldiers on the front. Any measure applied with hesitation, and where it would take a major commitment on the part of all used only half-measures. That was due to this state of affairs? I was convinced that it was an insufficient use of the war potential"<sup>(1)</sup>.

Returning to rationing, perhaps to compensate for the delay in the adoption of the measure Mussolini suddenly declared to the Council of Ministers: "*no one thinks that the rationing will be abolished at the end of the war. It will last till I exit. Why so many Agnelli and Donegani\* eat as their last worker*"<sup>(2)</sup>. The fact is that for various reasons of depression appeared in the population during the unfortunate Greece campaign, joined it, with serious repercussions on the morale and, above all, on the performance of the workers of heavy industry.

As for stocks, if they appeared in certain areas of relative consistency, in others there were reasonable grounds for alarm. Gen. Favagrossa, under-Secretary for war Production, with a reminder in December 31, 1941 date reported to Mussolini that lead and zinc "*you have concerns due to lack of manpower and the difficulty of transportation from Sardinia*", for rubber the situation was serious, and so goes for the soda and sodium carbonate for wool and cotton and leather.

In the field of armaments could rely on excellent installations. First of all those of metallurgical: the steel factories of Cornigliano Ligure, of Aosta and of Temi. then the mechanical factories: the establishments of Ansaldo di Sampierdarena, the establishment of the Vittoria di Cornigliano, the shipyards of Savoia and Sestri Ponente, the workshops of Fossati di Sestri, the establishment of Odero- Temi di Spezia, those of the artillery at Pozzuoli and other minor works.

All these complexes was to add a large number of mechanical workshops and foundries exist throughout Italy and perfectly appropriate, subject to the necessary adaptation, processing of individual pieces. Then the production of artillery could in theory be regarded with confidence. In practice, however, the talk was more complex. Favagrossa had talked to Mussolini that "*the raw deficiency does not allow either to exploit in the first program*"<sup>(3)</sup>, but, by its express admission, the phrase tended to present a pessimistic framework, so as to curb the ambitions Mussolini we build. In fact, as stated Gen. Cavallero in a note of early January 1942:

---

\* Agnelli the family which owns Fiat. **Guido Donegani** an industrialist in the chemical industry.

"If (...) the production does not meet the legitimate expectations<sup>(4)</sup>, the reason is to be found in a lack of coordination and industrial method which prevent a rational distribution of work. There are, for example, workshops that are completely stopped. It is so determined a very dangerous phenomenon: on the one hand, there are establishments overworked they cannot dispose of; on the other hand, workshops that are motionless and have several-or which are not used."

In Italy, the tanks had six large factories and armored vehicles two (Ansaldo and Terni), many other smaller mills able to laminate armor and several shipyards with machinery and workforce able to wait to that type of media.

"It is not those who do not see-continued Favagrossa -as well as in this field our country have equipment capable of reaching very high production. Not exaggerating at all when you stated that you could easily reach 1,000 tanks per month, since one car factory has been able to achieve the production of 200 cars per day. Even here there are the same problems that have really touched mentioned about artillery.

One of the most common situation is our poverty in terms of raw materials, particularly steel. But here is not about to see if our country is rich or poor of steel; but whether or not it possesses enough steel to meet the needs of war.

We set an example. How many guns need by Italy? Let's say a figure any, to exemplify. Fifty Thousand? Well you make account. Fifty thousand cannons of the average weight of a ton between big, medium and small require approximately fifty thousand tons, i.e. the fourth part of the steel that Italy produces in a single month.

You face the tanks. Twenty thousand tanks-the figure is purely illustrative-of average weight, between large and small, of fifteen tons each require about 300,000 tons of steel. You distribute this need in two years and you will see that it can be quietly satisfied with normal production.

Please refer to the ammunition the same calculation and you will see that you can't properly speak of a lack of raw materials, which would make it unworkable programs required by the needs of national defense (...).

These facts and these considerations allow to conclude that Italy is able to satisfy your needs of war. You must only method and individual coordination undertaken industrial<sup>(5)</sup>.

Cavallero was perfectly convinced that the disadvantages more organizational were unacceptable. On 27 September he addressed a very significant letter to Gen. Ago, Chairman of the higher Committee on firearms and ammunition;



“I had opportunity to see yesterday at a responsible authority as, in the course of defining a kind of simplified elevation collimator\* for the 47 piece, happened as follows.

After that all institutions gave a favorable opinion to this type, we proceeded to order of 20 copies for new experiments, which likely will involve the intervention of a new Commission with a consequent delay in the adoption of that type, while it is urgent to have it available.

More make me believe in the essential experiences that are made in many fields of our technique, you should still with a rate not much different from that of peacetime, whereas it is necessary, indeed essential and vital that, while ensuring the necessary guarantees experience, you tighten up the times and wherever possible will not wait for the perfect result to march always when the necessary prudence does not exclude that further improvements can be defined and adopted in March (...)”<sup>(6)</sup>.

The importance of the topic and the questions raised by these few brief is such as to justify an analytical study to in depth, which would be too far away with respect to the development of operations in North Africa. Certain it is that Kesselring, albeit in the eye, he saw right. And the greater the bitterness in thinking about what has not been done, at least in the year of non-belligerence. For that case, the subsequent campaign of Graziani could have a perhaps decisive. But however you look at the story, above a haphazard foreign policy, an organization of the country for the war severely lacking, a shortsighted and narrow-minded administration of armed forces, limited strategic conception, character defects of many of the political leaders, military and public, above all is a fact beyond dispute Italy entered the war in June 1940 Mussolini-and not only him! -was convinced that Germany had already won the war.

At the end of 1941 was underway of definition with the Third Reich Kesselring's position. Hitler thought the *Oberbefehlshaber Süd* (OBS = top commander in the South) was to ensure and improve the possibilities for supply of troops in North Africa, by air action against Malta exercised with extreme force. Kesselring came to Rome in the afternoon of 28 November. Both Cavallero and Adm. Riccardi, Chief of staff of the R. Navy, with Gen. Fougier, Chief of staff of the R. Air Force, had bothered to clarify carefully the duties of the Marshal. We wanted to avoid that he canvassed in R. Navy by Adm. Weichold, representative of the *Seekriegsleitung* (SKL = direction of naval warfare, i.e. Germanic Supermarina) and from 15 October Commander

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\* A telescope with crosshairs for the adjustment of the line of sight.

in Chief of the German Navy in the Mediterranean, bypassing the Comando Supremo, which was desired by the German side. The morning of the 29<sup>th</sup>, an hour before the Cavallero-Kesselring interview, with Gen. von Rintelen, military attaché and head of the German military mission in Rome, showed up at palazzo Vidoni. Cavallero was ready to seize the opportunity to anticipate Italian thinking:

“Gen. von Rintelen-wrote in his diary-back on the subject of collaboration with the German *Luftwaffe* that Kesselring command should be able to give orders to our Navy.

I reply that I would like to get together at all costs, but that the Comando Supremo cannot and must not abdicate its function and that the Italian Navy depends on the Comando Supremo. And my duty to il Duce and towards my Country to this. I would add that the surprise that I didn't like, that I must interpret the Duce and thought that my collaboration with Marshal will be equally fraternal devout and in substance, which is what matters most. We cannot put all the Navy at the behest of the OBS because the country itself would not.

The Comando Supremo has to control him; the Navy may not have orders from OBS. The schema that I have achieved is approved by Mussolini and I can't accept changes. For my part I'll second the work of Mar. Kesselring in all sorts of ways, but you have to let me do.

Wonder if they have anything to the contrary that I present to Mar. Kesselring a diagram I prepared; However I am sure that the tasks that I may not be transferred to another person. We will work so that all its experience is exploited in full, but it is not possible that the Comando Supremo, after long work to ensure the Union of all armed forces, surrenders to the results achieved. It would be a loss of prestige in front of the town”.

This was then repeated to Kesselring, with the assurance that the Comando Supremo would not have issued operations directives about theatres of operations in the Mediterranean and North Africa without having participated in their thoughts at the OBS. Kesselring's position was indeed delicate. The charge entrusted to him-under only to person of Mussolini-allowed him to dispose, directly or indirectly, of all German forces in Italy, Greece and Libya, which rightly Cavallero could accept up to a certain point. On the other hand, the OKW, through von Rintelen, wanted to keep the immediate contact with the Comando Supremo, especially in relation to transactions of Rommel's *Panzergruppe*, and SKL, Weichold, not thought through at all to renounce the conduct of the war in the Mediterranean. So, in a sense, by multiple parties arose interest to limit, at least initially, the actual activity of Kesselring to 2<sup>nd</sup> *Luftflotte*. This state of affairs will take advantage to Rommel, who will have another character whom to appeal

to bypass the Gen. Bastico, Commander of armed forces in North Africa. Kesselring became aware of the situation and did not want to force my hand. So I insisted and limited command activity on 2<sup>nd</sup> *Luftflotte*, composed by II *Fliegerkorps* (Gen. Loerzer) stationed in Sicily, from X *Fliegerkorps* (Gen. Geissler) in Greece and Crete and the contingent of *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* (Gen. Froelich) in Libya.

The outlines of the fight in the Mediterranean basin should be determined by agreement between the Comando Supremo and OBS and sanctioned by Mussolini. Guidelines for naval cooperation generally competed to the Comando Supremo, took orders from Duce, in collaboration with the OBS and the chiefs of staff of the R. Navy and R. Aeronautica. On that basis it so happened, on 19 January, the definition of operational arrangements: organs of liaison between the Comando Supremo and OBS, Aeronautica Sicily and II *Fliegerkorps*, Aeronautica Aegean, X *Fliegerkorps*, and 5th Air Fleet and *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika*; collaboration and cooperation at all levels. In particular, for North Africa was admitted, in urgent cases, the autonomous action of the dependent unit 5th Air Fleet and *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* without quote agreement and, taking into account that the tactical field air operations had to be harmonized with those on the ground, the 5th Air Fleet and *Fliegerfuhrer* was left sufficient autonomy -from Superaereo and OBS-to achieve a more effective permanent cooperation possible.

Since the war at sea in the Mediterranean was divided, for reconnaissance, between the R. Navy, R. air force and OBS, with constraint of ready exchange of results between all concerned. Fit in specific tasks of 2<sup>nd</sup> *Luftflotte* systematic reconnaissance and the neutralization of Malta and attacks against naval forces Mediterranean at any area of the sighted. Were of relevance of the R. Aeronautica in course of operations, for the neutralization of Malta, the torpedo bomber actions against ships wherever found and reconnaissance on naval and air bases in Cyprus, Syria and Palestine. The antiaircraft and antisubmarine escorts were split, though not rigidly.

On the other hand Supermarina had examined the needs of sea fight with the *Seekriegsleitung*. On 14-15 January Adm. Riccardi and Adm. Raeder had a meeting at Garmisch, in a series of personal interviews and meetings. The program was agreed in advance the study to plenary of the strategic situation in the Mediterranean, maritime transport and the supply of naphtha. Personal interviews were reserved for questions

most delicate, including relations with France and the eventual contest of Italian forces in the Black Sea. Agree that maintaining and strengthening the positions in North Africa constituted the primary objective to be achieved, and thus the need to neutralize Malta while studying employment opportunities, the two parties expressed different points of view on the other two arguments.

On the first, Raeder argued for the convenience of the Vichy Government a chance to rearm to defend Corsica, North Africa and West Africa from British attacks or DeGaullisti, while Radwan that a similar orientation objected could not but arouse concern because there was the founded suspicion that French forces could make common cause with the enemy at any time. The second point is translated into strengthening the naval domain in the Aegean, and so far nothing to say, but especially as a function of the offensive that Germany intended to launch primarily against the Red Army. In this regard, Riccardi said frankly that Italy was not able to provide ships for the foreseeable supplies, because of the shortage of tonnage was in his Merchant Navy. But the element that surfaced at every examination of operational possibilities was the vital problem of fuel oil.

Both parties denounced serious difficulties, despite having reduced power consumption to a minimum. R. Navy needed 75,000 tons per month to ensure transport in Libya, with the exclusion of any important commitment of naval arms. Calculating the quantity already promised by the Third Reich, its availability at 10 January could cover the needs of January and mid-February. Raeder said, or rather confirmed that the *Kriegsmarine* had renounced its share of nafta in favor of the R. Navy, which therefore could and had to adjust its operations on the basis of imports from Romania. Moreover, given that the current pace of these supplies was considered very doubtful the real possibility of achieving the necessary quantities, at least in the immediate future (in December imports had amounted to 21,549 tons, of which only 9,469 quality suitable for use), the delegations agreed on the principle that the two Navies had to lean on each other with their respective reservations in favor of the operation which in turn had been deemed more important.

All in all, the Conference doesn't lead to specific decisions much less resolution. Is limited to an overview and an exchange of opinions, but not much more is already scarce. Riccardi said it and closed the report stating that, given the strategic value

of the positions each of the belligerents had in the Mediterranean,

"The crucial task that the Italian Navy should fulfill remains that of Libyan supplies: If this task could not be carried out for lack of fuel oil, the whole Mediterranean situation would be *severely compromised*".

The activity of Cavallero in the second week of January, when the events of Cyrenaica left hoping a bit of breath and decreased enemy pressure in the Mediterranean led to believe likely a stagnation of at least a couple of months, focused mainly on the issue of overseas transport in its two aspects: routes and Malta. On 10 January, Col. Shimizu Moriakira, Japanese military attaché in Rome, had provided some information from Switzerland. In the Pacific would be limited to the Anglo-American Defense of Australia, New Zealand and India. Their main effort was to be directed against Germany and Italy by feeding the African theatre and strengthening the naval war in the Atlantic, with the Red Army to destroy the *Wehrmacht*, the German defensive ability impaired to attack from the North, intensifying propaganda to make possible the internal collapse of the enemy countries. The offensive against Japan was postponed for a second phase and was conducted at joined forces. The information was substantially accurate.

On 22 December, Churchill, with Adm. Pound, first Lord of the Admiralty, the Air Marshal Portal, head of the G.S. of *Royal Air Force*, the Mar. Dill, who had just left the post of Chief of the Imperial General Staff gen. to Alan Brooke, and lord Beaverbrook, a member of the war cabinet, arrived in Washington, after a journey by sea of ten days. For three weeks, remained at the White House, engaged in that series of conversations and contacts that was named *Arcadia*. A trip had much thought, yes we can deliver to the President three separate memos concerning the future development of the war, as well as it appeared in his eyes. The first was on the Atlantic front and, more precisely, the 1942 campaign that was supposed to allow the acquisition of the entire North Africa; the second refers to the Pacific front, where the main strategic objective should be to establish within five months a battle fleet superior to the Japan's naval forces

and to force the Empire of the rising sun to fall within its borders; the third concerned the campaign of 1943 in Europe to win the war against Germany.

The most interesting part of the first note (posted on 16 December) reflected the situation in Libya. Auchinleck's victory was taken for granted by the end of the month, with the defeat of the Italian-German unit in Cyrenaica and two consequences: for the Axis would be a tough blow, for Britain the desired security of Alexandria and the Suez Canal. Auchinleck would then immediately went to Tripoli and reached the Tunisian frontier. At the same time, it was necessary to make every effort to get to the cause of French North Africa Allies, using any enticement and forms of persuasion against the Vichy Government and military authorities in Rabat, Algiers and Tunis. "*Now is the time – wrote Churchill – offer to Vichy and to French North Africa a blessing or excommunication.*" However, although the French North Africa had deployed alongside the allies with the connivance of Vichy, it was still necessary to send substantial forces. Regardless of the 8th Army from Cyrenaica, in Britain there were two infantry divisions and one armored (about 55,000 men), which-replaced by the same number of American units in Ulster – could land in Algeria and Tunisia within three weeks from the order. These troops was advisable to add 150,000 men that the United States could bring to Casablanca and other Atlantic coast ports within six months. By 1942 it was necessary to occupy even more ports of Dakar and French West Africa.

“In conclusion: the main offensive effort of the war in the West during 1942 - ended Churchill - will be addressed to the occupation and control, to be made by Britain and the United States, of all French possessions in North and West Africa, and the subsequent control by the United Kingdom, the entire North African coast from Tunisia to Egypt, thus ensuring, if the naval situation allows it, the free transit through the Mediterranean towards the Levant and the Suez Canal. These great achievements will be reached only if the British and American naval superiority will be maintained in the Atlantic, if the supply lines will continue to carry out their task without interruption and if the British Isles will be protected effectively against an invasion”<sup>(7)</sup>.

Roosevelt and his advisers agreed to maximum on the ideas of Churchill. *Arcadia* works continued in a remarkable unity of intent. In terms more properly political, on 1 January Roosevelt (U.S.A.), Churchill (U.K.), Litvinov (U.S.S.R) and Soong (China)

signed the first joint declaration of the United Nations: twenty-six States, who accepted the program and principles contained in the so-called Atlantic Charter, signed by Roosevelt and Churchill on August 1941, -14 undertook to conduct thorough war against the Tripartite countries and their allies and not separately conclude Armistice or peace with them.<sup>(8)</sup>

Militarily the most significant result was the establishment of the Inter Allied Committee of Chiefs of staff based in Washington. To be honest this was one of the “*fictitious Washington measures*”, as it expressed with much skepticism by Gen. Brooke, and in fact for a long time the Committee was purely nominal. However, in the course of the conflict the organization proved to be efficient and suitable for the purpose.

But it should be at least a nod to American industrial mobilization. After hearing the need and predictions of Lord Beaverbrook, Roosevelt ordered the implementation of a program of military production which included the preparation of the following quantities of materials:

| Means               | 1942    | 1943      |
|---------------------|---------|-----------|
| Combat Aircraft     | 45,000  | 100,000   |
| Tanks               | 45,000  | 75,000    |
| Anti-aircraft guns, | 20,000  | 75,000    |
| Anti-tank guns      | 14,900  | not fixed |
| Machineguns         | 500,000 | not fixed |

Construction of merchant ships were expected to reach 8 million t.s.l in 1942 and 10 million in 1943. If Mussolini had known the United States he probably would have never signed the Pact of steel.

Americans gave immediately to study overseas shipping.

The operation, called *Super Gymnast*, was to absorb the English in Tunisia (*Gymnast*) and was based on the assumption of adequate cooperation from the French side, so as to leave room for only a few slight local resistance and uncoordinated. The first goal was a steadfast and reliable statement in Morocco, and then the advance would go on to Tunisia. Of course, much depended on the 8<sup>th</sup> army offensive. Given the American commitment, the operation was placed under U.S. command and planning. The tentative date was set for May 25. Say at once that already in late January in London, doubts arose because of the growing



need for the far East and the increasingly improbable French aid. On February 1 Churchill he resigned to drop it and a month later the British chiefs of staff will inform Washington that they believe no such initiative appeared possible before autumn, soon also shared opinion across the Atlantic, as were operations in Libya.

On 5 January Persia and Iraq came under the authority of Auchinleck and forces stationed there gave birth to the 10th Army (Gen. Quinan), but the situation in the Middle East is not improved at all, since, as you might guess, the events in the far East caused a significant absorption of air and ground units. At that period in London he decided to face the new needs with six infantry divisions and one armored brigade, drawing to the Middle East or expected reinforcements for it. They should therefore depart the Australian Corps (with the 6th and 7<sup>th</sup> Division) from Syria, the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Brigade (with 110 *Stuart*) from Egypt, the 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Division from India, two other divisions from the Middle East or from India, while the 18<sup>th</sup> Division, traveling on the route of the Cape of good hope, would be diverted to the new front. Both Auchinleck and Tedder, the Commander-in-Chief of the air force, ensured that such movements would not have affected the operation of *Acrobat*, but the situation at the northern borders of the Middle East would remain strongly altered. And that in spring the Germany could resume the offensive in Russia or invade Turkey, resulting in the prospect of seeing the *Panzer* appear in Persia and Syria already at the end of May, was strongly felt fear.

Auchinleck calculated the burden of defending bases in Egypt and landings in the Persian Gulf. Added to an aid to Turkey, if attacked and a total requirement of 15 infantry and 4 armored divisions. Aside from the large units in Cyrenaica and not considering the two Australian divisions, he had 2 armored divisions and 9 infantry divisions. Realizing the circumstances, he asked to receive an Armored Division and one infantry by mid-May. On 22 January Auchinleck went to Haifa to discuss with General Quinan and Wilson (Commander of the 9th Army in Syria) the situation which he envisaged. He returned to Cairo on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, in time to receive the first of the Italian-German counter-offensive at Cyrenaica.

## 2. THE ITALIAN-GERMAN FORCES AND UNDERSTANDINGS

In mid-January 1942 the *Panzergruppe Afrika* was placed in a semicircle around el Agheila, facing East, with the right pushed up South of Maaten and Giofer and a Italian-German detachment in Marada. In particular, Rommel had deployed the XXI Corps (Gen. Navarini) between Marsa el-Brega and Wadi el-Faregh, with the *Sabratha* Inf. Div. (Gen. Saldanha) in direct barrier to the via Balbia<sup>(9)</sup>; the *Trento* Inf. Div. (Gen. Gotti) to close the existing space between the *sebcha* es-Seghira and Bu Mdeues including<sup>(10)</sup>; the *Pavia* Inf. Div. (Gen. Fernandes) on Wadi el- Faregh controlled node of slopes of Maaten Belcleibat and which support on the wing for the *Trento*<sup>(11)</sup>.

The X Corps (Gen. Giada) was positioned with *Brescia* Inf. Div. (Gen. Lombardi) by Maaten Giofer at Sidi Tabet including<sup>(12)</sup> and *Bologna* Inf. Div. (Gen. Gloria) by Sidi Tabet to Hatiet es-Sorra<sup>(13)</sup>: should prevent short-range turning of the defensive position.

Along the stretch of *Wadi* Faregh between Maaten Belcleibat and Maaten Giofer had entered the German Burkhardt Group consisting of a battalion of paratroopers, in the connection of XXI and X Corps. far to the South, at Marada the Deumiller detachment, of mixed constitution, controlled the desert backgrounds. To the rear were gathering mobile forces.

The Corps of Maneuver (CAM) of Gen. Zingales, with *Ariete* Arm. Div. (Gen. De Stefanis)<sup>(14)</sup> and the *Trieste* Mot. Div. (Gen. Azzi)<sup>(15)</sup>, located south of el Agheila; the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* (DAK) of Gen. Crüwell, with 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzerdivision* (Gen. von Vaerst)<sup>(16)</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzerdivision* (Gen. von Bismark)<sup>(17)</sup> was slightly less advanced. In reserve, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light (Gen. Veith)<sup>(18)</sup> and the new Marcks grouping,<sup>(19)</sup> located east of el Agheila.

While taking the deployment, which by 14 January had modifying by arrivals and complementing until the 16<sup>th</sup> (sketch No. 1), another and more complex operation had principle. Around el Agheila had been disbursed from Marmarica about 34,000 men-24,000 Italians and 10,000 Germans-clearly insufficient to make ten Axis divisions and its tactical and logistical support. Immediately began the arrival of reinforcements from motherland and Tripolitania, was-were given to a suitable structural rearrangement at the time and environment. The Comando Superiore had decided to adopt "*Infantry Division form A.S. 42*" for the divisions *Brescia*, *Bologna*, *Pavia*, *Sabratha* and *Trento*. It was an adaptation of the tables issued in 1941 by the army general staff for the "*Mot. Div. Type A.S.*",

LO SCHIERAMENTO ITALO-TEDESCO AD EL-AGHEILA  
IL 17 GENNAIO 1942

This is a hand-drawn map of the Agedabia region in Libya. The map shows the coastline on the left and top, with several towns and settlements marked. Key locations include Agedabia at the top right, el-Aghheiat on the coast, and el-Haresat to the east. A road, labeled 'Via Balha', runs from Agedabia towards the coast. Other roads are shown as dashed lines. The map also depicts the Vadi el-Faregh, a large wadi area. Several smaller towns and villages are marked, including Marada, Beni Mousa, and Beni Siera. A scale bar at the bottom indicates distances in kilometers, ranging from 0 to 40 km. The map is drawn with simple lines and includes some topographical features like hills and wadis.

on the basis of criteria suggested or imposed by conditions: reduction of the force to about 7,000 men to limit the weight of large logistic units; uniform assignment of anti-tank weapons to infantry companies, two regiments with two battalions (of four companies each) and a mortar company with 81; increased artillery fire and adding a group specifically suitable for anti-aircraft and anti-tank fire, and then a regiment on two groups of 75/27, two from 100/17 and one 88/55; No variation for the engineers; limited services drastically, then only the health section and the subsistence section.

For the divisions of the Corps of Maneuver-whose recon grouping had “melted” during the retreat had been studied a different solution for infantry units and artillery. The *Trieste* motorized Division, had to have an armored car battalion, one medium tank battalion, 65<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment with two battalions, 21<sup>st</sup> artillery regiment, for a total of 6,700 men about. The *Ariete* Armored Division was to be formed from an armored car battalion, a battalion from 47/32 self-propelled, 132<sup>nd</sup> medium tank Regiment, 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri regiment with two Bersaglieri battalions and one from 47/32 anti-tank, 132<sup>nd</sup> artillery with two groups of 75/27, two groups of 75/18 self-propelled, a group of 105/28 and one of 90/53, for approximately 9,000 men overall.

Of course the new order could only be achieved gradually in relation to the arrival of complementary items and material. So, initially, the order situation changed little and the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiment, which would pass to the X and XXI Corps to form under other role to a element of mechanized Corps, remained in their respective divisions, *Trento* and *Trieste*. However, even through outstanding and imaginable difficulty, the rearrangement proceeded with satisfactorily alacrity. Of particular value for new tanks and recommissioning damaged transport efficiency: on 20 January the CAM had online 89 effective M 13 tanks and the DAK presented 23 armored cars and 111 Pzkw Mark III and IV, plus another 28 coming soon.

Bastico had acted in the field of personnel, deciding to replace some Division Commander, and the backline, which is sort of Tripolitania, establishing the Defense Command of Tripolitania (Gen. Armando) articulated in Castelverde, Zuara and Garian and in the fortress of Tripoli; the Libyan Sahara Command at Hon. the *sirtico* command sector divided into subsectors of Sirte and Misurata<sup>(20)</sup>.

Even the 5th Air Fleet (Gen. Marquis) had been cleared up. It was subdivided into two parts: West sector in Western Tripolitania, and Advanced sector, in Eastern Tripolitania. The latter, whose Command was in Sirte, had deployed combat units on three fields. In Tamet there was a fighter Group with MC 202, at en-Nofilia a second fighter Group with MC 200, at the Altar of Jesi three fighter groups (one with MC 202 and two with MC 200) and two squadrons of dive bombers with Ju. 87 and CR 42.

In operational matters, thought the troop commander fronting the British, i.e. of Rommel, was improving appearance as gradually managed to know the enemy. Under the date of 21 January, he noted in his diary:

“I had kept secret the counter-offensive of the *Panzergruppe* from Marsa el-Brega in the East and had not informed neither the Italian Comando Supremo nor the German one. We knew from experience that the Italian Comando Supremo could not keep secrets and everything was broadcast via radio in Rome ended up in British ears. However, I was placed with the Quartermaster [the *Panzergruppe*'s Intendant] that the *Panzergruppe* were posted at every roadhouse of Tripolitania [Eastern] on January 21, the day set for the action. His Ecc. Bastico, at Homs, was aware of my intention in this way, of course, and it raged for not being informed earlier. In this sense referred to Rome and I'm not surprised when Cavallero was personally in Marsa el-Brega days later.”<sup>(21)</sup>

Firstly, it is clear that the text was placed on 21 January, but written afterwards. Secondly, Rommel was unaware - and, indeed, the question was ignored by everyone until 1974 - encrypted messages by the Germans with the *Enigma* cipher, once intercepted by the British, were safely decrypted near London with a machine stolen in Poland in 1939 and used under the code *Ultra*<sup>(22)</sup>. This lack of knowledge not only strengthened among our allies that the Italians were disastrously “loose lipped” but he believed, even by some Italian, that one or more traitors were part of senior commands and especially Supermarina.

Finally, the smug satisfaction of colorful tale doesn't seem very appropriate. Rommel has soon aimed at reacting against an opponent not necessarily in trouble after crossing almost all of Cyrenaica, is unquestionable. The then Major. von Mellenthin, Chief of the *Panzergruppe*'s information Office, on 12 January, during a meeting held to take stock of the situation, provided

a trusted commander of British dispositions. Not only that, but pointed out that, according to their calculations, the *Panzergruppe* would have enjoyed a certain superiority in armored vehicles until January 25, then the balance would be returned to the British. This place, and considering the flaws of Marsa el-Brega and wear and tear of Italian infantry divisions, could become dangerous to remain on the defensive. Rommel was impressed by such arguments and understood immediately the need to aim a lot, if not everything, about the surprise factor. They were the strict precautions taken. *"The Commander of the Afrikakorps-wrote von Mellenthin-was not informed of the plan until January 16 and the verbal instructions his Divisions received were 1923"*.

In substance this responds to the truth and it was inevitable to successive approximations, also because the danger of a possible further British effort was made possible since 13 January. To 10:00 of that morning, in fact, the XXI Corps had received an eloquent as string phonogram: *"the battle is imminent, therefore urge sending everything available personnel and materials. Rommel"* and, later, the evening bulletin of the *Panzergruppe's* situation in these terms: *"the General Impression: Shortly you will have to rely on an enemy attack with gravity at point and South of Bir es-Suera [i.e. just south of the Trento], contemporary stakes riding astride the via Balbia [sector of the Sabratha: On the 14<sup>th</sup> new specification: "it seems that the enemy is preparing to attack", but in the evening the hypothesis mildly away: «the day 16/1 you will have to rely on the beginning of the battle-advised the Panzergruppe. The same assignments for the Corps like so far. In the rest, take the day to prepare intensively for battle (...)"*<sup>(24)</sup>.

On 15 January Rommel's thinking came to maturity. At 11 o'clock in the morning he arrived under the command of CAM and had an interview with Gen. Zingales, during which, after you mentioned terms euphoric successes reported by the Japanese and their reflections towards the availability of British forces in the Middle East, said the *"situation in our theater is good; However maybe tomorrow the enemy will attack between Faregh and Balbia. The CTA [German Africa Corps] and CAM counter attack and destroy enemy ground maneuvering and tighten against the sea. It will thus win the battle begun on 19 November,"* and prescribed that the commanders took the units and with full facilities.<sup>(25)</sup> If this is expressed with Zakri it is unthinkable that he hadn't already talked about the topic

with Crüwell. Rather it is worth to stress that at this point, and again for a few days, he was not an offensive, but a decisive counter-attack against an enemy when he left the first move. In other words, it was a *defensive oriented battle*.

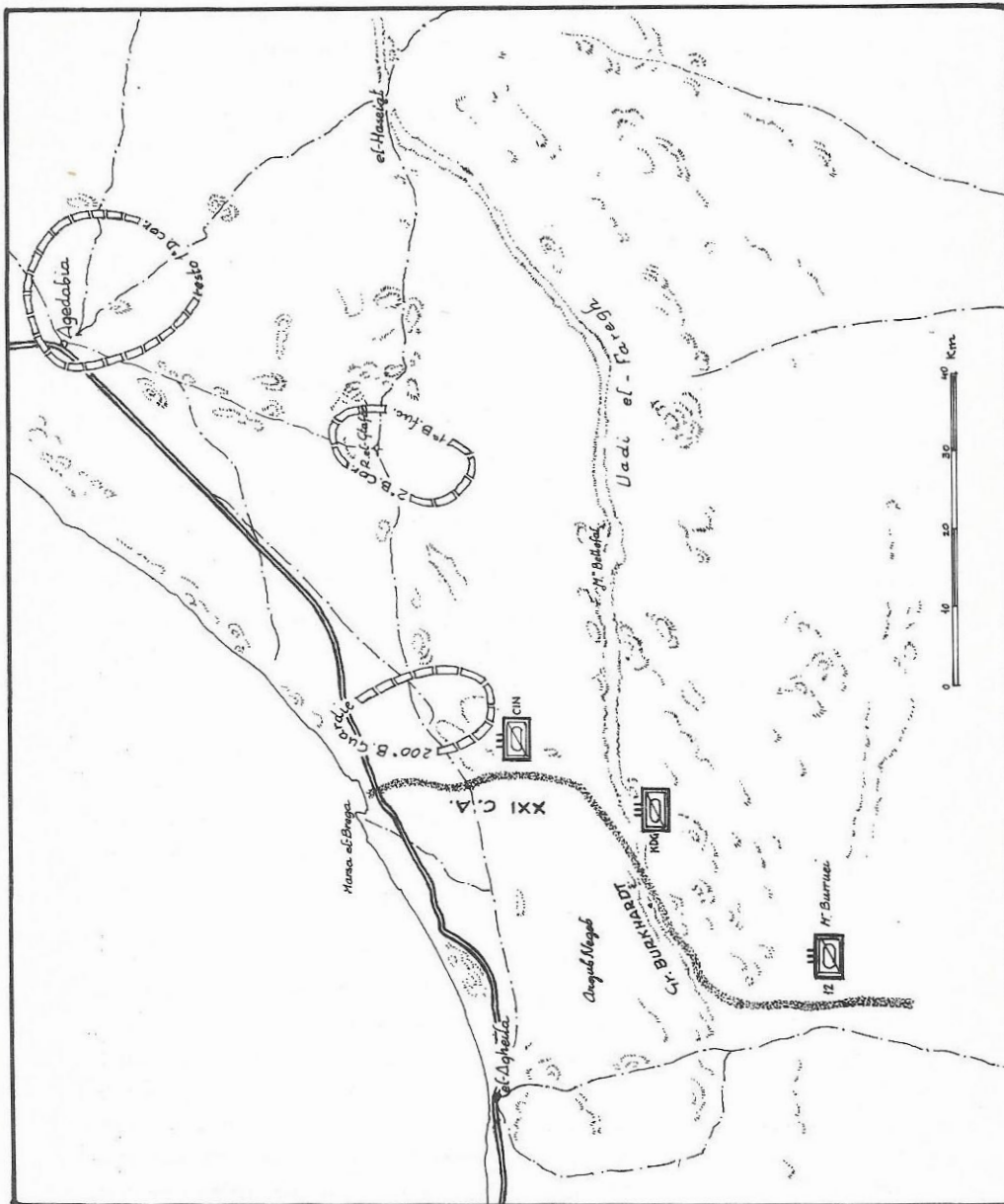
Being the 17<sup>th</sup> that was the operational design changed, probably now appearing unlikely British initiative due to the poor conditions under which were to be fronting the forces of the *Panzergruppe*: 1st Armored Division far from the training grade of the 7<sup>th</sup>; malfunctioning services; bad air-ground cooperation; the low morale<sup>(26)</sup>. The fact is that at 15:15 on the 17<sup>th</sup> Rommel returned to command of the CAM and conferred at length with Zakri: had to act counter offensively “*among a few days*” to annihilate the enemy groupings southwest of Ajdabiya on the via Balbia and Wadi el-Faregh (sketch No. 2) with the DAK acting from the South and the CAM from the North. The narrows of el-Gtafia was to represent the theoretical point of the two branches. “*Eliminated an opponent who is located in this zone, you will see later whether the transactions should proceed or if the units are to withdraw to the bases of departure*”. The concentration of CAM in Sidi Hmuda, some 20 kilometers east of el Agheila, probably would have taken place on the 18<sup>th</sup>. Two were things to do immediately, preserving the secrecy about the operation: recon the tracks and locate the advance track to the Balbia through the minefields on the front of the XXI Corps. This time it was an *offensive battle*. Completed the interview, Zingales summoned the commanders of the *Ariete* and *Trieste* divisions and just prescribe the study of location in the area of Sidi Hmuda and reconnaissance of the slopes and the pass<sup>(27)</sup>.

The morning on Jan. 18. Navarini received provisions to keep the area in front of the *Sabratha* unencumbered by the enemy and the greatest depth possible, and was advised to a high-level meeting at the *Panzergruppe* tactical Command ordered scheduled for the following day. And 19:10 a.m., Rommel gave the commanders of the large units concerned orders for attack<sup>(28)</sup>. Given that the opponent was, at the time, lower forces and that probably awaited the arrival of new troops expected<sup>(29)</sup> -between the end of the month and early February-to resume the effort towards the Tripolitania, the *Panzergruppe* could close the enemy in between Melah en Nogra - el Gtafia track - Maaten Bettafalel – to el Faregh destroy it with an concentric action. The bag was to be determined by Marcks grouping to the North, with initial target Melah en- Nogra and reserve for a decision whether to continue Southeast or Northeast, and a tactical group



LA PRESUNTA SITUAZIONE BRITANNICA  
IL 17 GENNAIO SECONDO IL PANZERGRUPPE AFRIKA

Schizzo n. 2



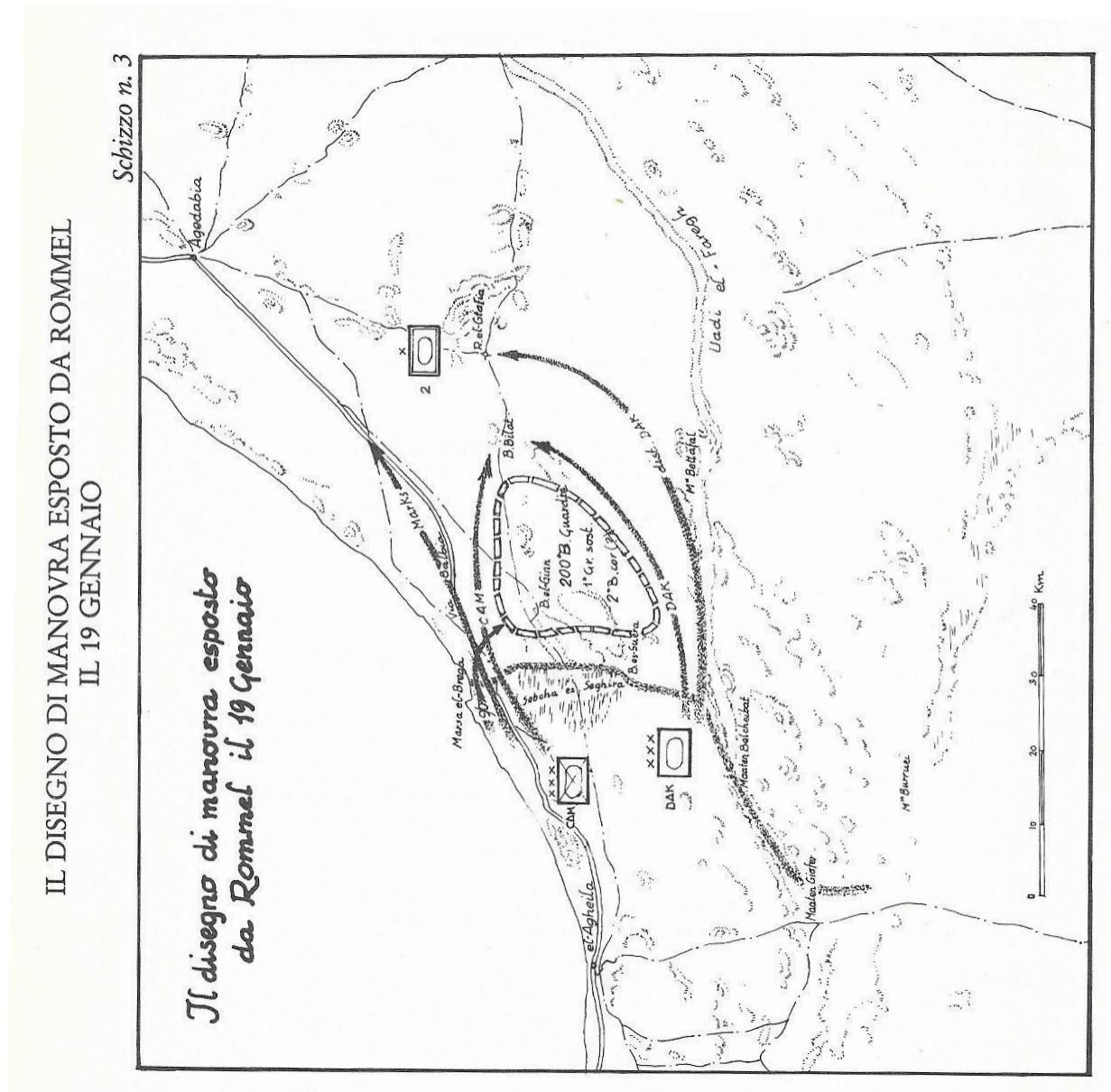
the *Afrikakorps* in the South, with the goal of the narrows of el-Gtafia. The branches to annihilation, however, were formed by the CAM to the North, with Bir Bilal and narrowing towards the South and Southwestern encirclement area of competence, and DAK to the South, with the objective of Bir Bu Gedaria and then the reduction to the North and Northwest of the Pocket. In a second phase the DAK had the task of intervention against a possible counter-attack of the British 2nd Armored Brigade coming from Ajdabiya.

The release of the mechanized Corps from defensive position was to be facilitated by a couple of battalions of the 90th Light, to leapfrog the *Sabratha* and form a barrier, facing Southeast, beyond the Balbia, to prevent an thrust North by the trapped enemy, and the *Pavia*, from whose area where the *Afrikakorps* came from. Fire support was the task of the 104<sup>th</sup> artillery command (German), by the XXI Corps artillery command<sup>(30)</sup> and *Fliegerführer Afrika* (sketch No. 3).

The meeting ended at 11:30 and two hours later, Rommel ordered the moving of units in areas of the *ghibli* collection that, blowing violently, it hid the movements from British aerial observation. Then, later, the specification: the beginning of operation was fixed for 08:30 of the 21<sup>st</sup>. From that moment everything was oriented towards the attack. On the evening of the 20<sup>th</sup> German interception service captured enemy communications according to which “*enemy activity is normal.*”

From what precedes emerges clearly as the Rommel came to materialize in the form known only in recent days and as the privacy measures taken fall under normal securities precautions in such circumstances. At 17:00 that evening had written to his wife: “*the situation is growing to our advantage and I have a head full of projects that I don't mention to anyone around here. Think I'm crazy. But they are not. Just look a bit farther than them(...)*”<sup>(31)</sup>. Actually, even that afternoon and at least with Zakri (but surely even with Crüwell), had spoken with the utmost frankness. According to one version, he would send to someone to Leut. Col. Heggenreiner, a liaison officer at the Higher Command, and communicated with a smile that was about to take place, the attack would have forbidden the hunger beckoned by Bastico; Indeed he should give these the impression of his intention to withdraw even further West<sup>(32)</sup>. The thing, as well as referring, it lacks reliability. The measures implemented were aimed at addressing and defeat a defensive battle that everyone expected from the 14<sup>th</sup>,

The operation proposed by Rommel on 19 January



and the idea of another setback could not be formulated through a liaison officer: suffice it to recall the pestering him and repeated personal intervention of Rommel before the withdraw from Tobruk- Bir el Gobie and Ain el Gazala.

Even Rommel in his diary welcomes silence used against the Comando Supremo, the OKW and Bastico, but that the Comando Superiore had already received an orientation seems validated by the fact that the 18<sup>th</sup> Bastico sent their Chief of staff, Gen. Gambara, from Rommel to hear how things were. The report of the interview was then forwarded to Cavallero:

“Yesterday posted by Rommel General Gambara. In friendly conversation along Rommel expressed warm thanks to speed replenishment Division, of which it is strongly admired for highest offensive spirit from which all are animated. As I expected, Rommel also believes that new offensive planned by enemy has yet to suffer any delay.

He has also expressed intention to proceed with CAM and DAK offensive operation purpose disrupt enemy South Marsa Brega. At opinion request, I made by General Gambara answer that his opinion tallies perfectly with mine. It is immediately placed on those intentions, urgent turnout batteries and other mobile means which the organization had already prepared.

Rommel was also very pleased with service organization, which shall also needs his troops. Overall, I am pleased to say that everything goes very well”<sup>(33)</sup>.

Moreover, it must be recognized that, despite having talked and discussed with the Comando Superiore of the next move, Rommel had to say nothing about until the time decided by the beginning of the offensive, obviously giving the impression that this was imminent, Yes, but not immediately. And this behavior, impossible, at least to a certain extent, with the dependant big unit, was preserved even with the Italian liaison Staff. In this regard, an episode is deeply significant. At dawn on the 21<sup>st</sup>, with Gen. Calvi was convened under the command of the *Panzergruppe*. Come with the 08:00 truck to the German Operations Office, "Westphal, from perfect Cavalry officer- told a witness - *we welcomed a salute and a slight bow and handed him an envelope. It contained a few typewritten lines. ‘7 o'clock this morning began the attack to annihilate the enemy in Cyrenaica’*”<sup>(34)</sup>.

Let's say, then, that what Rommel had guarded jealously in his mind was the intention-if just barely fighting penalty came to you fine, and we will see that he will be cautious in the early days of developing another gallop at least until Tobruk, as did the previous year.

Roughly, then, the mistrust of Italian and German High Commands, you can reasonably assume that Rommel, secrecy aside, he had no desire of interference from above. We have already established that he was in Berlin or Rome only when made him comfortable to get material help or support in his decisions, and now that the command of all troops operating on the fringes of Cyrenaica allowed him in some way to “neutralize” Bastico, he couldn't risk a veto of Hitler or Mussolini. And if in Rome there was basically acquiescence toward him, in Berlin the speech changed. On January 20 with Gen. Marras, Italian military attaché in Germany, telegraphed to the Comando Supremo, the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) estimated in place, in North Africa, the preparation of a further attempt to launch as British reinforcements flowed. Though *"I asked privately the OKW Situation Office to present situation approval from part of the Supreme Command. This request seems dictated by the contrasts that exist between the current optimistic here and other less optimistic"*<sup>(35)</sup>.

### 3. THE FORCES AND BRITISH INTENTIONS

On 13 January Churchill had written to Auchinleck: *“without a doubt you have every reason to seek out the decision in a battle of Agheila -Marada front. We will support whatever the result”*<sup>(36)</sup>. But his expectations were to be disappointed. The day after Gen. Ritchie, Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> army, turned to Auchinleck clarifying of deemed unable to begin an offensive against the German-Italian positions before 15 February. The problems were logistical and organic nature. The first showed literally condition. On balance, the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp (Gen. Godwin-Austen) needed approximately 1,500 tons per day only for ordinary and supplies, since at Tobruk arrived altogether just 1,150 tons, the deficit was sensible, especially considering the need for extraordinary supplies and the length of the terrestrial communications lines to Ajdabiya. The complete revamping of the port of Benghazi was no easy undertaking, this time, given the destruction wrought by the first Axis retreat. Of course, since 29 December had been placed to the restoration work, which proceeded well but needed time. In essence, the power of a big complex of forces limited west of Cyrenaica had many difficulties.

For this reason, primarily, 13<sup>th</sup> Corp was scattered from Marsa el-Brega to Tobruk. In contact with the *Panzergruppe* was the 1st Armored Division, now commanded by Gen. Messervy<sup>(37)</sup>, with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade and the 1<sup>st</sup> support group, and 200<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade (sketch No. 4). Of these units cited, two faced Italian-German deployment: the 200<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade (Gen. Marriott), who had just changed their indicative number from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 200<sup>th</sup> <sup>(38)</sup>, was deployed between the via Balbia and Bir es-Suera; the 1<sup>st</sup> support group (Gen. Vallentin), which will complete the replacement of the 7<sup>th</sup> support group of the 7th Armored Division only on 19 January, stood astride the *Wadi el-Faregh*, West of Maaten Bettafal<sup>(39)</sup>. Forward, across the front from Marsa el-Brega on Hatiet es-Sorra, acted three armored car regiments: the *Central India Horse*, the 1<sup>st</sup> *King's Dragoon Guards* and 12<sup>th</sup> Lancer, regiments which was clearly withdrawing almost completely for recommissioning efficiency, due to the overwhelming percentage of damaged vehicles. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade (Gen. R. Briggs) was centered northeast of Antelat so its three regiments each of the tanks which had averaged 26 *cruisers* and 18 *Stuart* completing training in the desert<sup>(40)</sup>.

Even more on the rear, the 4th Indian Division (Gen. Tucker) had its 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Benghazi, the 5th at Barce and 11<sup>th</sup> at Tobruk, and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade (Gen. Scott Cockburn), strongly shaken by the unfortunate end of December fighting, was even withdrawn to Tobruk for getting put back into order<sup>(41)</sup>. The remainder of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, 30 Corps was at Tobruk and the Egyptian border. Ritchie's command was transferred to Tmimi, on the Gulf of Bomba, at 360 kilometers as the crow flies from Marsa el-Brega, and Godwin-Austen at Msus.

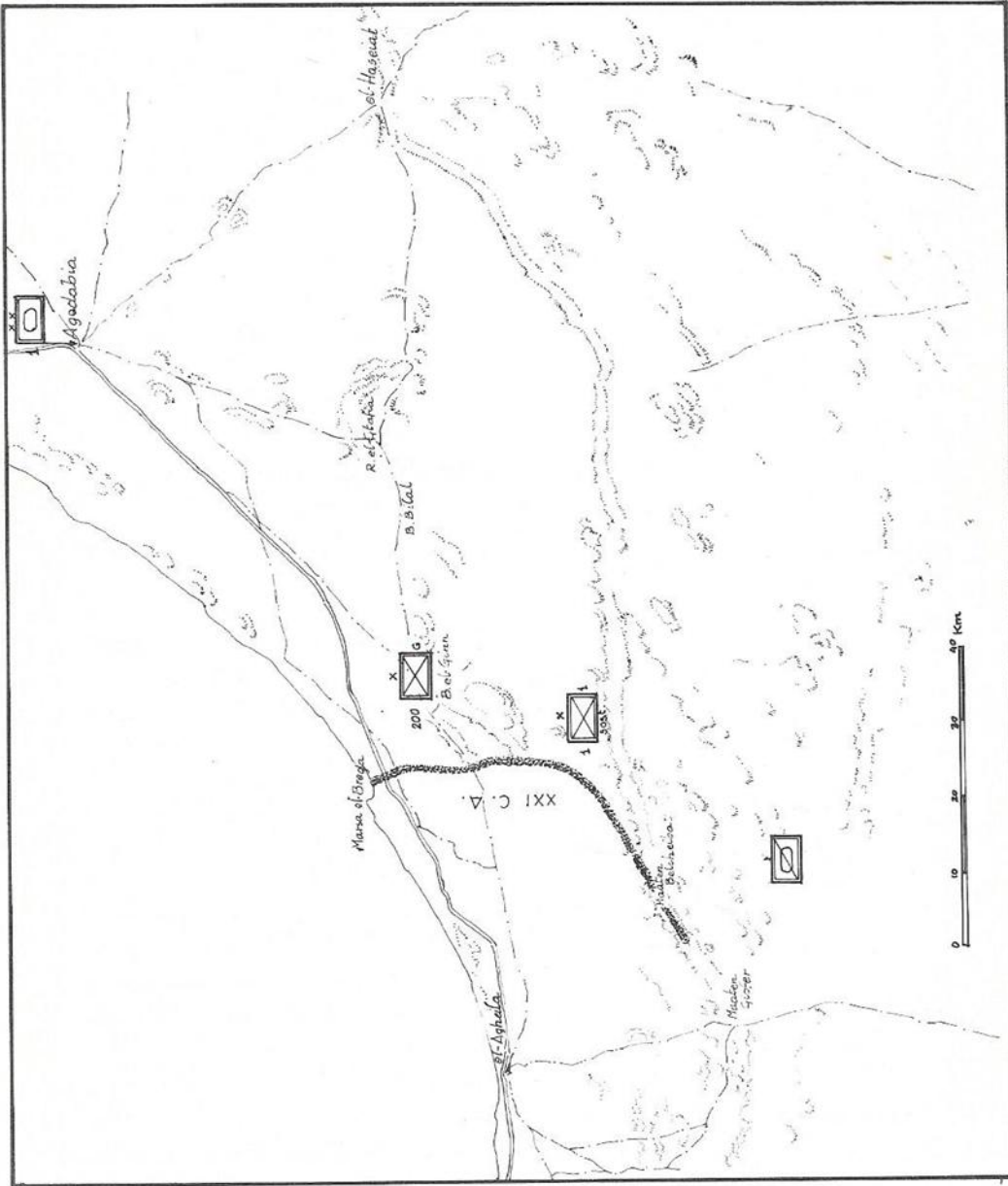
Air support was provided by the *Desert Air Force* (Air Vice Marshal Coningham) with nine fighter groups of the bases of Antelat; four divided between Benina, Derna, el-Adem and Tobruk for port security; two bomber groups at Gambut and Bu Amud. Altogether, about 445 aircraft 280 were available for combat, roughly how many efficient aircraft as in the advanced sector of the Italian 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet and *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika*.

The situation of the Axis as appreciated in command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army as follows: Divisions *Sabratha*, *Brescia* and *Pavia* deployed between Marsa el-Brèga and *Wadi el-Faregh*; divisions *Ariete*, *Trieste* and *Trento* by Maaten Giofer to Hatiet es-Sorra; a part of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light with the parachute Burkhardt battalion and Italian units at Marada; the bulk of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light in the Sidi Hmuda area to meet any penetrations and the *Panzerdivisionen* grouped slightly more to

The British advanced deployment on 18 January

IL DISPOSITIVO AVANZATO BRITANNICO  
IL 18 GENNAIO

Schizzo n. 4





the South. It wasn't an exact reconstruction, but, all in all, acceptable in his defensive compound. Evaluation of strength estimated present 17,000 German and 18,000 Italian, with 70 medium tanks in all, of which 25 Germans. Another 20 *Panzer* could be considered further available<sup>(42)</sup>. This deficient appreciation of armored vehicles was perhaps the element that gave greater tranquility to the 8th Army.

Ritchie was, as always, very optimistic. He appears to have been advised to study a possibility of Defense at Gazala, to the case, albeit remote, of a sudden Rommel's counter-offensive, but he refused the proposal as useless<sup>(43)</sup>. Instead requested to Godwin-Austen the General outlines of a plan to maneuver against el Agheila, based on a frontal Infantry Brigade between Marsa el-Brega and *Wadi el-Faregh*, turning of the Italian-German positions from the South by an Armored Division, and the landing contemporary of another infantry brigade on the *Panzergruppe's* backline, i.e. to the West of el Agheila<sup>(44)</sup>. The Commander of 13<sup>th</sup> Corps said to Messervy, for the moment, to acquire a secure knowledge of the terrain and disturb the opponent with minor mobile column, which led to 200<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade and 1<sup>st</sup> support group to operate with the battle groups of infantry and artillery at the level of the company: four of the guards with one battalion in reserve at Ajdabiya and support group, also with a reserve pulled back. As a result, in front of the Italian -German positions and to a depth of more than 120 kilometers there was no 'mass' to encircle, contrary to what is claimed by Rommel.

The British intelligence service gave to confident that Rommel could not set any major move before the middle of February, however, even in light of the events of late December, considered possible local initiatives. This hypothesis also accepted pure legend of scruple - Messervy was appointed to be in a position to conduct a delaying action until the alignment Ajdabiya-el Haseiat, where all of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp would quickly surrounded.

Of course, not very reassuring identified Messervy or your dispositions, very rarefied, nor the relationship of distance and, in spite of the alleged state of helplessness of the *Panzergruppe*, put the convenience of carrying forward the Army Corps: the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division at Ajdabiya and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade at Giof el-Matar. The suggestion was rejected by Godwin-Austen not as bad, but because the difficulties of feeding the many units in an area

so advanced. So the situation continued what it was until 21 January. Auchinleck was very taken by being assigned the Mediterranean issues (including Malta) and the entire Middle East. After carefully weighing situation, On 19 January sent out the directive no. 110 to Ritchie and Gen. Holmes, Commander of the British troops in Egypt:

- “1. It is my intention to continue the offensive in Libya and Tripoli remains the objective.
2. Given, however, the fluidity of the overall strategic situation, we have to consider the possibility of not being able to continue the offensive in Libya and having to switch to the defensive on the Western front.
3. If we were forced into this, it is my intention to stop on Agheila-Marada and preventing any enemy attempt to break through to the East. Broad directives for the defense of that line will be issued separately.
4. If we are unable to occupy this line, or, which, to keep it, I intend to make a retreat towards the Northeast and then East until Sollum -Giarabub line, where the enemy must be stopped. During the retreat should be made every effort to delay the progression, in order to prevent him from attacking as long as possible using the advanced landing strips.
5. The retreat will be Agheila-Ajdabiya-Bir Ben Gania-Bir Hakeim-Sidi Omar. The coastal road Benghazi-Derna-Tobruk- Sollum may be used for material and stocks removal, but should not be traveled by troops, except for units located north of Benghazi-Mechili (including location).
- ..
6. It is not my intention to try to keep permanently Tobruk or any other locality to the West of the border.
7. Defense of Sollum -Giarabub must be set on the following policies (...).
8. The entrenched camp of Marsa Matruh will have (...).
9. The positions of Maaten Baggush and Bardia are dismantled (...).
10. Continue work on original plans about the position of el-Alamein, when you present the opportunity, until completed”<sup>(45)</sup>.

The directives mentioned above are very interesting for two reasons. The Commander in Chief of the Middle East, while taking into consideration all eventualities, not had any concern about the moves of Rommel, so much for granted that could unseat the *Panzergruppe's* current positions then occupy against reversal. His worry was the northern front, including Cyprus. However, if the Western Front had found serious difficulties, he would not to hesitate to abandon the whole of Cyrenaica, Tobruk included, in order, fundamental, to defend the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf are

Second plea: for the first time the defensive position of el-Alamein appears concretely in British operational studies.

On January 21 Gen. Brooke wrote from London to Auchinleck:

“(…) There is an embarrassing problem with *Acrobat*. Non-destruction of Rommel's forces, the time gained from these with rearguard actions, the inevitable delay arranging *Acrobat* and the reduction of naval forces in the Eastern Mediterranean, everything makes serious situation (...)”,

and he kept hinting at serious inconvenience of having to succumb to nature logistics constraints to resume their advance on Tripoli. “*Against the Italians all would be fine-held to specify-but against the Germans, especially with six weeks available to receive reinforcements, the odds may play heavily in our disfavor(…)*”<sup>(46)</sup>. In essence, wished to clarify that he would not stressed to attack Rommel without a reasonable chance of success. Seems to have been the only voice to express caution against Rommel. Just that day, January 21, “*the improbable happened and without any omen, Axis forces began to advance*”<sup>(47)</sup>.

It has been said that the surprise in the British camp was due above all to a series of measures implemented by Rommel to give credit to the imminence of a retreat: truck columns moving towards the West (and returning at night on locations), burning of buildings and boats during the night on the 21<sup>st</sup>, etc. You can consider lifting most fantasies carve the image of the *Desert Fox*. In fact, the only news about the preparations for a withdrawal of the *Panzergruppe* towards the West was delivered the next day the 20<sup>th</sup> by some Arabs to the advanced troops of the British 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division, but he left by the time he found. To the enemy every German-Italian activity was normal and the first summary information from the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, issued the 21<sup>st</sup> reported without comment the existence of a large number of auto vehicles encountered East and South of el Agheila on the previous day. No, all the information gathered by the *Intelligence Service*, offered a reliable cue to think of a retreat or an imminent attack. If rumor was spread between January 16 and 19, concerned a possible landing at Malta<sup>(48)</sup>.

NOTE TO CHAPTER ONE

- 1 ALBERT KESSELRING, *Memorie di guerra*, Garzanti, Milan 1934, p. 99.
- 2 GALEAZZO CIANO, *Diario* 1937-1943, Rizzoli, Milan 1980, p. 539.
- 3 CARLO FAVAGROSSA, *Perché perdemmo la guerra*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1946, p. 166.
- 4 For example, at the end of 1941 the production of 90/53 pieces in shipyards Ansaldo of Genoa was thirty Cannon per month for R. Army on an order of 1,116 pieces. Moreover, the production of 110 cross pieces could not be over because the final tests were not completed (while at the army general staff was that the material was completely defined) and would take seven to eight months from the date of delivery of the raw materials. For material from 75/46 monthly production was over thirty pieces by the Ansaldo Pozzuoli, but there were difficulties for electrical and optical equipment from the Galileo.
- 5 DIARIO CVALERO, date 7.1.1942.
6. *Ibid* date 27.9.1941.
- 7 WINSTON CHURCHILL, the second world war, part III, vol. II, Mondadori, Milan 1950, pp. 306-307.
- 8) The signatory Nations were: United States, Great Britain, Soviet Union, China, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Costa Rica, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Dominican Republic, San Salvador, Greece, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, India, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Norway, Panama, Poland, South Africa, Yugoslavia.
- 9 The Div. Inf. *Sabatha* consisted of 85<sup>th</sup> and 86<sup>th</sup> infantry, *Giovani Fascisti* grouping, San Marco battalion, two artillery groups of medium-sized and smaller units.
- 10 The Div. Inf *Trento* consisted of 61<sup>st</sup> and 62<sup>nd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, 46<sup>th</sup> artillery and minors units
- 11 The Div. Inf. *Pavia* consisted of 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> infantry, 3<sup>rd</sup> rapid artillery and smaller units.
- 12 The Div. Inf *Brescia* consisted of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> infantry, 1<sup>st</sup> rapid artillery and minor units.
- 13 The Div. Inf *Bologna* consisted of 39<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> infantry, 205<sup>th</sup> artillery and smaller units.
- 14 The Div. Arm. *Ariete* consisted of 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, 132<sup>nd</sup> infantry Tank, 132<sup>nd</sup> artillery and ammunition and Minor units.
15. The Div. Mot *Trieste* consisted of 65<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> infantry 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, 21<sup>st</sup> artillery and minor unit
- 16 The 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* consisted of 8<sup>th</sup> Panzerregiment, 15th rifle Brigade (about 115<sup>th</sup> and 200<sup>th</sup> rifle regiment), 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn., 33<sup>rd</sup> Motorized artillery, 33<sup>rd</sup> anti-tank Bn and minor units.
- 17 The 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* consisted of 5<sup>th</sup> Panzerregiment, 8<sup>th</sup> machine-gun battalion, 155<sup>th</sup> Motorized artillery, 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn, 3<sup>rd</sup> anti-tank Bn and smaller units
- 18 The 90th Light Division consisted of 361<sup>st</sup> infantry, 155<sup>th</sup> riflemen (with Marcks KG), parachute group Burkhardt, an anti-aircraft and anti-tank group.
- 19 KG Marcks consisted of 155<sup>th</sup> Fusiliers (of the 90th light), II/104<sup>th</sup> infantry, 605<sup>th</sup> Panzerjaeger group, I/2<sup>nd</sup> Italian fast artillery (Maj. Pardi), a 88/56.
- 20 The territorial reordering of Tripolitania entered into force on January 20, 1942.
- 21 BASIL H. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* "Harcourt, Brace co., New York, 1953 p. 181. See also e. ROMMEL, war without hate, Garzanti, Milan 1959, pp. 101-102.
- 22 FREDERICK W. WINTERBOTHAN, *the Ultra Secret*, Mursia, Milano 1976.
- 23 FRIEDRICH W. VON MELLENTHIN, *Panzer Battles*, Futura Publications Ltd., London, 1977 pp. 100-101.
- 24 Historical Journal XXI Corps on the dates mentioned.
- 25 THE Historical Journal of the Corps Of Maneuver. It should be noted that normally the Deu tsches Korps (DAK) in the Italian match was shown in Italian translation: corpo German d'africa (CTA)

- 26) Historical Diary of XXI Corps, summary information of 17.1.1942.
  - 27) Historical Diary Corps of Maneuver, date 17.1.1942. a day later came to them CAM order whereby the Gen. De Stefanis left *Trento* and replaced with Gen. Balotta in command of the *Ariete*. command then passed to Gen. Trento Gotti.
  - 28) From the Italian side were Gen. Navarini, Zingales, Gioda, De Stefanis and Azzi.
  - 29) According to the German intelligence service, the 22<sup>nd</sup> armored brigade, strongly to proven had been withdrawn North of Msus. The possible reinforcements were represented by 4<sup>th</sup> Indian div. and the Polish Brigade spread between Benghazi and Barce, by the 70th Division from Tobruk and the 2nd South African Division.
  - 30) Between the supporting artillery were the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup> army grouping. While the first was equipped with outdated and little mobile guns from 149/35, the second was the only one of this specialty to have modern materials: two groups from 149/28, one from 149/40 and one from 152/37.
- This group will provide an enormous amount of aid to the CAM throughout the offensive.
- 31) B.H. LIDDELL HART, op. cited above, p. 179.
  - 32) DAVID IRVING, *La pista della Volpe*, Mondadori, Milano 1978, p. 169. Paul Carell provides a version even more picturesque and unreal (*Le volpi del deserto*), Baldini e Castoldi, Milano 1961, pp. 206-209).
  - 33) Historical Journal Upper North Africa Command (DSCSAS), tele/314 G dated 19.1.1942, at 19:55.
  - 34) GIUSEPPE MARIO BIANCHI, *Con Rommel nel deserto*, Ciarrapico, Rome 1981, pp. 120 - 121.
  - 35) The historical Journal Comando Supremo (DSCS), tele 236/S date 20.1.1942, at 17.04. the 19<sup>th</sup> Rommel wrote them at home, "*Gause wrote from Rome. It seems that the Fuhrer has approved all What I did, and it's all praise and admiration*" (B. Liddell Hart, op. cited, p. 180).
  - 36) JOHN CONNELL, Auchinleck, Kassel, London, 1959, p. 424.
  - 37) The 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division was commanded by Gen. Messervy, for the urgent replacement of Gen. Lumsden, wounded during an air attack.
  - 38) The 200th guards Brigade consisted of: III battalion *Coldstream Guards*, II battalion *Scots Guards*, two artillery campaign regiments the, a medium-sized battery, three anti-tank, anti-aircraft and two one squadron of Hussars.
  - 39) The 1<sup>st</sup> support group consisted of: I battalion *Rifle Brigade*, II battalion *King's Royal Rifles*, a mixed squadron of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> *County of London Yeomanry* 11<sup>th</sup> campaign artillery, and some artillery batteries of various types.
  - 40) The 2nd Armored Brigade consisted of: *The Queen's Bay*, IX Lancers, 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars, 9<sup>th</sup> battalion of the *Rifle Brigade*, three campaign regiments, one artillery, one anti-tank and one antiaircraft.
  - 41) The 22nd Brigade was deemed by the Italian intelligence service still East of Maaten Bettafal, and by the German North of Msus.
  - 42) CLAUDE J. E. AUCHINLECK, Operations in the Middle East from November 1, 1941 to 15<sup>th</sup> August 1942, Dispatch published as a supplement to the London Gazette of 13.1.1948.
  - 43) CORRELLI BARNETT, *I generali del deserto*, Longanesi, Milano 1950, p. 189.
  - 44) I.S.O. Playfair, The Mediterranean and Middle East, H.M.S.O., London 1960, vol. III, p. 135.
  - 45) C. AUCHINLECK, Dispatch cited, Appendix 6, pp. 377-378.
  - 46) J. CONNELL, op. cited, p. 432.
  - 47) C. AUCHINLECK, Dispatch cited, p. 348.
  - 48) F.M. HINSLEY, British Intelligence in the Second World War, vol. II, H.M.S.O., London 1981, p. 331-332

## Chapter Two

### THE SECOND ITALO-GERMAN COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

#### 1. THE BATTLE OF AJDABIYA (21-25 January).

Just before the hour X, Rommel wrote to his wife:

“The army will launch its counteroffensive in two hours. After carefully weighing the pros and the cons, I have decided to take the risk. I have absolute confidence that God will stretch the protection of his hand on us and that He will grant us victory,”<sup>(1)</sup>.

The bulletin posted that morning to signal made it known to everyone that the goal to be achieved is translated in the annihilation of the enemy. The enemy, of course, that stood in front of the *Panzergruppe*, which is southwest of Ajdabiya: nobody could imagine anything else. Even Rommel which, however, was probably the only one to nourish hope he can catch on the fly any chance being offered by case or by the opponent. The report sounded like this:

“German soldiers and Italian soldiers,  
You have already borne hard battles against an enemy of overwhelming superiority. Your aggressive spirit is intact.  
Currently we are superior to the enemy force which is next to our positions. And to annihilate the opponent that today the army moves to attack.  
I look forward to that every soldier gives all of himself in these decisive days.  
Long live Italy! Long live the great German Reich!  
Long live our leaders!”.

The attack, that has gathered on the basis of departure during the night, he set in motion at 08:30 of the 21<sup>st</sup>, preceded by the intervention of aviation. At the meeting of January 19, Rommel had explained how the encirclement, although finding *a priori* could indicate where they would have closed the pincers. So it was reserved to issue timely orders during action, without prejudice to the absolute necessity of not leaving gaps through which the big opponent - 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade who seemed to had moved to the area of el-Gtafia - could escape.

But something different soon manifested as imagined. Not met reaction. Small British columns, operating between the sea and the *Wadi el-Faregh*, had watched with awe appearance of the

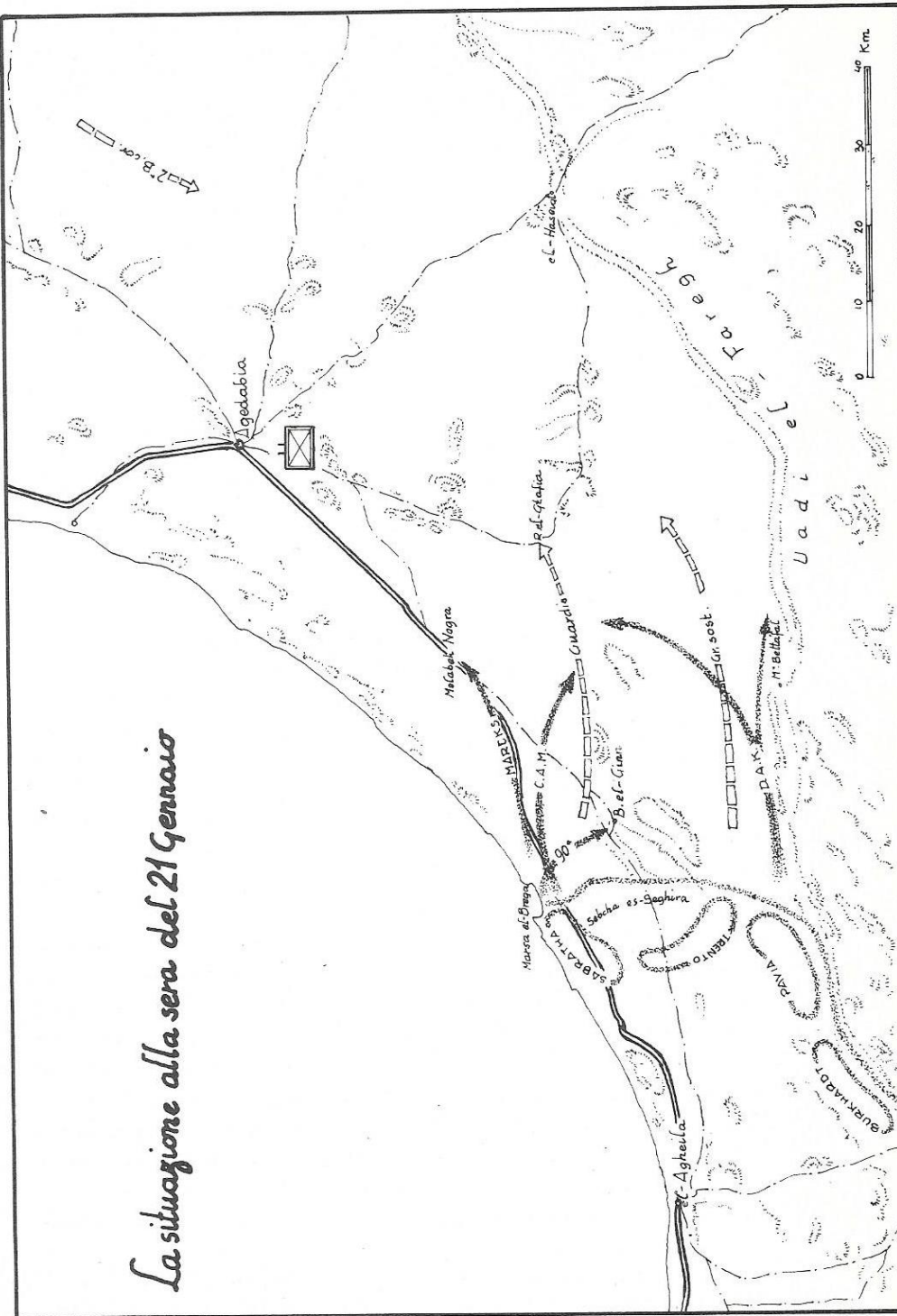
the Axis armored divisions. As soon as they were sure that it was an attack, began a rapid retreat towards North-East without any concerns of resistance and dynamic contrast. Not that it was indeed easy. The support group, extremely uncomfortable in the desert, soon began to lose vehicles and artillery pieces (the fall of the night counted sixteen lost campaign guns) and the Guards weren't much better. In those circumstances, and given that it had not been possible to bring more troops and supplies on Ajdabiya-el Haseiat line, which Gen. Messervy concluded that the defense of this position had no more sense, so he communicated to Marriott and Vallentin to follow a delaying action.

Around noon, the Corps of Maneuvering found itself straddling the via Balbia, some fifteen kilometres along the lines, while the *Afrikakorps* encountered some difficulty in dune terrain north of the *Wadi el-Faregh*. Rommel, who carefully followed the advance, decided to conclude and ordered Zakri and Crüwell respectively push the *Ariete* and the 15th *Panzer* to Bir Bilal. At 14:45 with Gen. De Stefanis reached an alignment a few kilometers to the West of Bir Bilal, materializing its main objective, while von Vaerst stopped five kilometers south of the town. The encirclement was completed, but the enemy had escaped to the network stream. And, unfortunately, even the outer ring was finding emptiness: late afternoon Marcks grouping reached Melah en-Ristorante and a detachment of the DAK is pushing beyond Maaten Bettafal without being able to establish contact with British units (sketch No. 5).

At this point, Rommel had to review the projects. The interceptions were outlining a consoling framework. It seemed that the 2nd Armored Brigade was in anguish, perhaps for logistical reasons; the Guards reported the Italian-German progression and informed their frequent retreats; Divisional services had received orders to begin the move back. Therefore, on balance, before the two mechanized Corps there were only three known groupings, two of which (and the Guards support group), although with a few tanks, could not in fact concern evidently were not offering resistance worthy of the name. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade remained in, probably collected South of Agedabia. As for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade, it was beyond Msus, then out of reach of intervention. At the moment one could hypothesize a action in Ajdabiya, with the Guards and the support group in defense of the locality (shunting pin) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade prepared to the reaction dynamics. First – before Ajdabiya there was to expect respect for the will

## LA SITUAZIONE ALLA SERA DEL 21 GENNAIO

*La situazione alla sera del 21 Gennaio*





of the enemy. Since everything was comforting the evaluation of a British inferiority, worth, in fact it was necessary to take another step in order to eliminate the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division. But a second encirclement became problematic because it would separate the two branches of the pincers (also, now there was more artillery support of the XXI Corps), exposed the *Panzer* to a gnawing crossing the desert east of the Ajdabiya region and required too much time.

Ultimately, it appeared preferable to mass on Balbia, overcome Ajdabiya and wrap from West to East, with a semicircle clockwise, as it was in the area. Other troops would secure the operation and faced the possible influx from Benghazi of the Indian 4th Division. This had to be the reasoning of Rommel, who, in the late afternoon, ordered the Marcks grouping push with the head up to thirty kilometers from Ajdabiya; to the CAM, to gather on the via Balbia; tactical group of the 90th Light, leaving Bir el-Ginn, where it had stopped, and the newest addition to *Trieste*; the *Afrikakorps*, leaving Bir Bilal and move towards the Balbia to get in on the action in front of the CAM.

But there was another. If things were better times, it became possible to buy space North of Ajdabiya to Beda Fomm-Antelat -Saunnu alignment and bring forward in the increments X and XXI Corps. To this end, Rommel asked the Comando Superiore for 6,000 tons of petrol and a substantial reinforcement of vehicles for the transfer, meanwhile, of the *Sabratha* and of the *Bologna*. At the same time, warned the two corps that these divisions will take ready to move on the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> vehicles provided by the provision of the Stewardship Delegation.

This aroused immediate suspicion of Bastico. Knowing Rommel, he realized that the slightest success the German would not have stopped in the area of Antelat, but would have proceeded aggressively northwards, dragging the *Panzergruppe* more or less ordered scrapped at chance. Not that Bastico was in principle hostile to an all-out counter-offensive, but not believed possible to launch a stake in depth, initially conceived as limited maneuver in front of the defensive position, without a convenient organization. And then, knowing what the conditions of infantry divisions, did not feel to place them to the danger still incomplete. And then there were the trucks. And finally if, after an advance of a few hundred kilometers, these divisions were forced to fall back, you would be lost because fatigue scrapped together.

Initially Messervy had not broken up: evidently the

Italian-German move on broad front was intended to test the extent of British equipment and to examine the intentions. However, at the end of the day, when he put the sums together began to warn some cause for concern. If the Guards and the support group, which had already separately collected for natural tendency of units, they gathered, they submitted to the opponent a greedy mouthful, so it was necessary that Marriott remain South of Agedabia and Vallentin grew his left in the direction of el-Haseiat. Meanwhile, Briggs had to bring the 2nd Armored Brigade at Giof el-Matar, preparing to intervene on the side of the enemy.

On the morning of January 22, at 07:30, Rommel did communicate operational guidelines to Navarini. the XXI Corp assigned the task of settling down in defense with the bulk on the Beda Fomm-Antelat line and an part at Ajdabiya. Therefore the *Sabratha* was supposed to be ready to move truck carried since the same noon; unit of *Pavia* had to immediately move by foot north of Sidi Hmuda, on Balbia; the *Trento*, passing through the minefields, should reach the Balbia East of sebcha es-Seghira. Then Rommel went to CAM and gave Command verbally that the *Ariete* concentrate West of Ajdabiya, facing South-East, and the *Trieste*, turning to the North of the village, lining up at Chor el-Bidan, at the beginning of the track to Saunnu.

Everything is put in motion. At about 11:00, the Marcks grouping occupied Ajdabiya after a short fight with the Guards and proceeded to Antelat and the opponent hasn't trended towards the Southeast. At noon the *Trieste* peeled off in turn through Ajdabiya direct North-East. With the Division there was even Zingales. Rommel, already in place, quickly ordered that 8<sup>th</sup> army artillery group was started at the earliest to Ajdabiya, giving precedence to the group of 149/40. *Ariete*, on the other hand, had lost time to collect the armored vehicles and was quite rearward. At 14:00, Rommel's visited again the CAM: the *Trieste* had chosen the track to the Saunnu instead of Antelat, however, so as not to complicate the movements, the Division could stop where it was, facing Southeast. As for the *Ariete* urged to take the defense of Ajdabiya. Crüwell, on its behalf, had passed the *Trieste* and was running with two *Panzerdivisionen*.

Messervy had noticed, of course, the threat and had placed the Guards to block the via Balbia, however Marriott units were too spaced out and were not able to put an obstacle to flanking. Then changed the target of

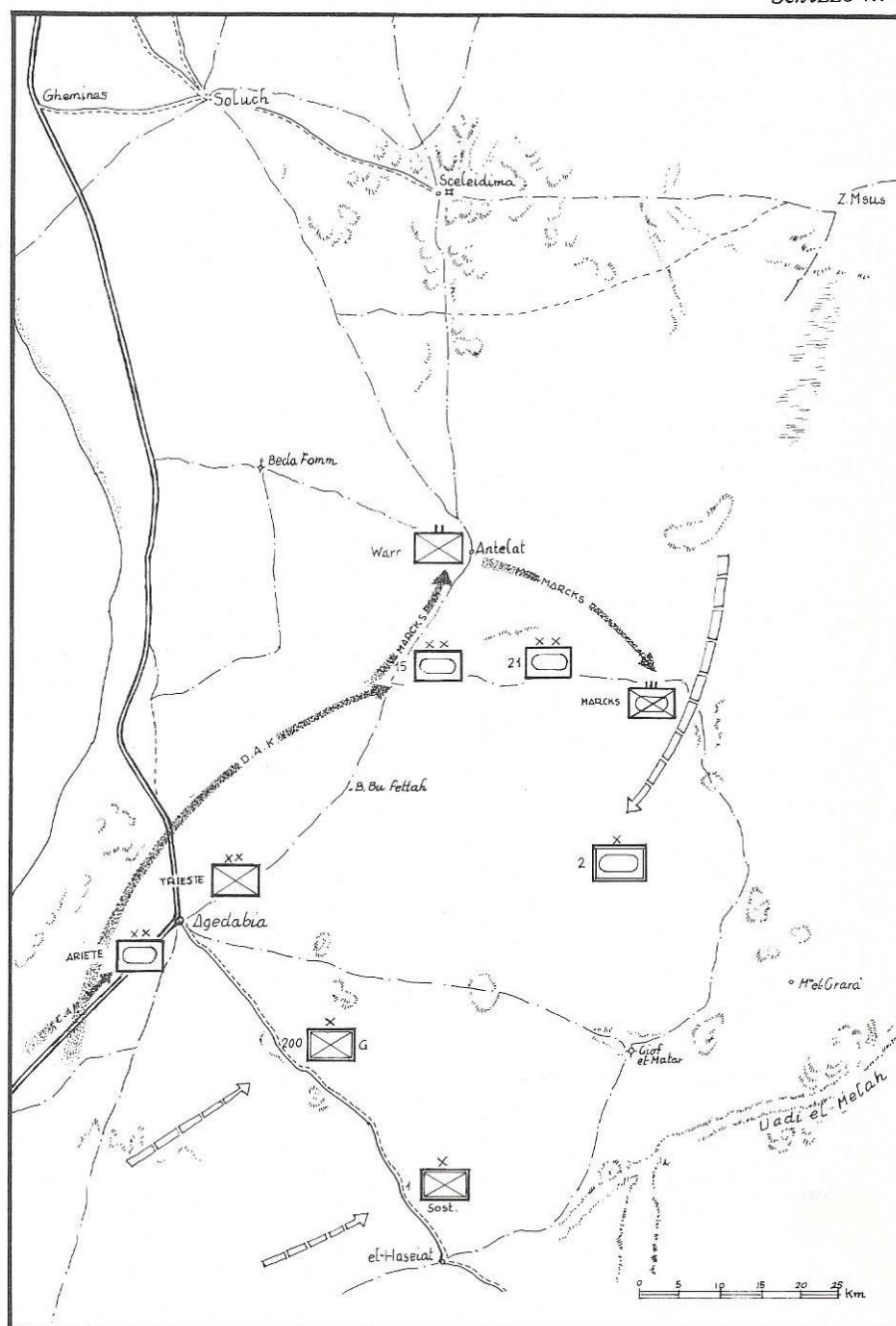
2nd Armored Brigade: instead of at Giof el-Matar, had to stay 20 km further north. The fall of night the 200<sup>th</sup> Guard Brigade (less the II *Scots*, backward at Antelat) and the support group were the Ajdabiya-el Haseiat alignment (sketch No. 6).

In Benghazi and Tmimi, even Godwin-Austen and Ritchie were trying to form an opinion on current events. The more pensive was the Commander of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp. The 1st Armored Division ran two dangers: the first, to be encircled and destroyed by force; the second, of communications being cut off with the depots of Msus, which rested, and being deleted for lack of supplies. As a result, ordered Messervy to take road and go north of Antelat and Saunnu. But the looming possibility of a very major threat: loss of Benghazi. To this end, Gen. Tucker was instructed to call in Benghazi the 11th Indian Brigade and send the 7<sup>th</sup> to Ghemines-Suluq, to block accesses to the city, turning at the same time to protect the evacuation of the port and the warehouses. In addition to this Group No. 262 was authorized to move from Antelat to Wsus.

Ritchie came to Tmimi in the afternoon of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Had worked, in Cairo, on plans for *Acrobat* and already knew of Rommel's initiative. Did not believe it anything serious, as the *Panzergruppe* was notoriously yet too weak to attempt a big effort. Had to be, therefore, a reconnaissance in force, for not to exceed Ajdabiya. Indeed, he was convinced that it would be presented as a gift from heaven, the opportunity to hit him [the enemy] hard when it pushed forward its neck, as it seemed possible that it already was doing”<sup>(2)</sup>.

At 16:30 Rommel appeared again at CAM. Was fully satisfied. “*Believes-it is written in the historical diary of Corps-that the enemy can no longer escape. In formed there are approximately 2,000 vehicles.*” To be honest, the bag was not yet formed, but it orders had already been given. An hour before the Marcks grouping, abandoned the via Balbia, had occupied Antelat and, without stopping, headed towards Saunnu. The movements not met significant resistance. Many were small groups or units that they were caught; many of those who fled in disorder to the North. At dusk, Saunnu was busy and a little later the 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer formed northeast of Ajdabiya a barrier facing South; the Warrelmann group is organized to strongpoint at Antelat and the *Ariete* sorting out southwest of Ajdabiya, where it was deploying the entire 8<sup>th</sup> artillery corps grouping.

The 19<sup>th</sup> the German interception service took this message



from the 1st Armored Division under the command of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp: “*very difficult situation at the 1 battalion of the Rifle Brigade [that was translated into 1<sup>st</sup> rifle Brigade] ... it was dead and buried. Do not yet know the details*” and to 21:05 the following order given by Messervy to Marriott: “*Your units are not deployed on suitable locations. You must first fight the enemy advance astride the Ajdabiya-Antelat axis Nothing should distract you from the task of primary importance*”. Marriott's response was transmitted at 22:55: “*I run the order received, but I had no gasoline to start the movement before darkness arrived. Arthur [probably the Hussar squadron of the Brigade] and the group will be tomorrow at dawn in Heasly [= Maaten el-Baghliya, northeast of Ajdabiya, on track for Antelat]*”<sup>(3)</sup>.

Meanwhile, at 12.45, Cavallero had arrived at Castel Benito. Ongoing operations knew little or nothing. According to Kesselring, he was “*in a State of high agitation for fear of a possible failure*”, so join now to get together in Libya<sup>(4)</sup>, but, to tell the truth, no note or similar confirmation document cited mood. To push it to the trip was instead another reason: the background conflict between the Comando Superiore and the *Panzergruppe* and, in particular, the tension between Gambara and Rommel. On 17 January was returning to Rome with Leut. Col. Montezemolo, the Comando Supremo's operations officer, sent to North Africa to *report on* the situation, and the news provided by the officer as well as a letter of Bastico Cavallero had convinced the opportunity of a visit *in loco*.

He was accompanied by Gen. von Rintelen and Leut. Col. Montezemolo and proceeded immediately with another aircraft to Misurata. In the interview, which instead took place in the evening at the tactical post of the Comando Superiore, Bastico, abetted by Gambara and Marchesi, is expressed in terms of serious doubts about the real intentions of Rommel. Pointing out all given the on ongoing reordering X and XXI Corps and tried to convince visitors of the need to stop the action. Although Cavallero accept his views, but he provided an additional reason for caution with the hint at possible intervention of the English and DeGaullist in Tunisia, Bastico was afraid of not being sufficiently eloquent or Rommel, at the meeting the next day with Cavallero, would know to bring him to his point of view. In fact prepared his own for Gambara, in charge of accompanying the Chief of the General staff, reiterating the concepts already expressed:

“1. The current situation requires a watchful defensive-actively waiting, on the positions currently occupied (Marsa Al burayqah-Agheila-Marada).

2. How did his Ecc. Cavallero on possible enemy actions in Tripolitania makes it even more now, to takes this attitude.

3. I had approved the limited-range offensive proposal by Gen. Rommel because he tended to dismiss any offensive actions over time, and to *test* enemy, holding it, fighting spirit right of our troops.

4. The "raid" threatens to turn into a "fast forward", which I don't approve, approve because:

- would put in crisis new units, who have not yet passed the withdraw;
- could not have goals away because we don't have the means to feed an long range offensive action;

- could create a new situation far weaker than the present.

5. This place, I find it necessary to invoke delay some on Gen. Rommel to a more realistic assessment of the situation, and command him, to chance, to suspend any further advance and retreat to the starting positions”<sup>(5)</sup>.

Rommel, meanwhile, was issuing orders for the 23<sup>rd</sup>: the annihilation of the 1st Armored Division, East of Ajdabiya, was the task of the *Afrikakorps*, which was closed with the Marcks grouping the space between Saunnu and *Wadi el-Melah* (continuation of the *Wadi el-Faregh*) and resolved the situation with the two *Panzerdivisionen*. The CAM was to prevent the British to get to the North and Northeast, by controlling the stretch south of the Ajdabiya-Bir Bu Fettah. In case you ever looked like a British movement from Benghazi southward, the CAM had to leave within an hour from order, towards Solluch-Ghemines to take the enemy counterattack. Similarly the DAK was moved along the Antelat-el Abiar.

As you can see, and as it is logical, uncertainties persisted in Rommel's mind about the advanced troops of the location of Godwin-Austen. Was sure that they were “*in full retreat*”<sup>(6)</sup>; was unaware of exactly how many units were trapped East of Ajdabiya. believed, according to the latest radio intercepts that a sample of the guards would attack at dawn “*from the North and Northwest*”<sup>(7)</sup> to break the circle; could infer that the enemy was now forced to choose between a battle in Ajdabiya or probably retreat on a large scale. But no certainty. However, shortly after midnight, wanted the X and XXI Corps prepare to move toward Benghazi.

In the early hours of 23 January on the British 1st Armored Division loomed the threat of annihilation. Aware of the vital

importance of the depot of Msus, Messervy decided to make their way and ordered the 2nd Armored Brigade to head north-east of Antelat, prompting the *Queen's Bays* in Saunnu to be well aware of the fact. The support group and the Guards, who were now near Giof el-Matar, should also go on Saunnu or eastwards, if imposed by the circumstances. The maneuver succeeded (though a significant disorder), but thanks to a mistake by the command of the *Afrikakorps*.

Rommel passed from one to the other commands in the suborder and did well, considering the extreme delays that occurred in radio broadcasts. At 08:25 came to the command of the CAM. He began by stating that the *Panzergruppe Afrika* had become, by order of the Führer, the *Panzerarmee Afrika*, then pointed out that probably the *Trieste* was attacked from the South by 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade the and North with elements of the Guard, so as soon as the *Sabratha* arrived, the *Ariete* would be disengaged by the defense and placed between *Trieste* and the *Afrikakorps*. That said, departed. Meanwhile, the Commander of *Panzerarmee* transmitted the order for almost all troops remained on the positions of Marsa el-Brega: the entire XXI and X Corps with the *Bologna* and all media must start to Ajdabiya. For dismounted infantry had set the stage of 36 kilometers, with stop and rest at night. Only the *Brescia* remained at Maaten Giofer<sup>(8)</sup>.

At 05:00 Marcks grouping is set in motion by Maaten, on el-Grara Trigh el Abd. At Saunnu would be replaced by the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, but for a deficient branch of orders by the command of DAK, the Gen. von Bismark didn't budge, so shortly after 09:00 the *Bays* found places evacuate and realized of the existence of the gap. Moreover, almost simultaneously, the bulk of the Brigade stumbles into the 21st *Panzer*. After a brief confrontation, Bismarck believed to lie on the arms the entire British Division and asked to the stronger 15th *Panzer*, situated further to the West, and Briggs was feared to be arrive on the entire *Afrikakorps*. Why, the one stopped and the other tried to put towards Saunnu. Rommel had perceived the situation. Passed again by the CAM and solicited the *Ariete* to keep ready for intervention, then ran to the DAK and pushed Crüwell to attack towards Saunnu with all that he had. In the early afternoon began rather confused fighting, which lasted until dusk. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade was able to concentrate on Saunnu at 17:00, but, come the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, fatigue came to disengage losing many tanks<sup>(9)</sup>. The 1st support group, invested

by 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, was driven to the East and only with much effort managed to escape to the North. The 200<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Guards was more successful: apart from a trivial clash with units of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, arrived above Saunnu without much damage (sketch No. 7). Messervy was now raised and Ritchie, who had made a morning visit to the command of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, told to Auchinleck that the situation was under control and that he was preparing to sweep the few isolated columns that Rommel could push beyond Antelat.

While the *Afrikakorps* was letting the English 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division escape, Rommel was reached at Ajdabiya by Cavallero and Kesselring. After the met exhibition events of the new *Oberbefehlshaber*<sup>(10)</sup> of the *Panzerarmee Afrika*, Cavallero is congratulated the success and demanded to know the designs for the future. The question was biased, because indiscretions or personal considerations German source had surfaced the objectives of Barce and of Gazala. Rommel expressed rather generically, hinting at the blatant existing in British disorientation and the possibility to exploit the events without much hesitation, then, in the face of objections from Cavallero, himself fallen back on the arrest of the advance at a well-defined line north of Ajdabiya. *“His ideas I have appeared still in formation - Cavallero telegraphed to Mussolini the next day-but I realized to be well fixed in he thought bringing his troops on that any advanced line that had reached”*<sup>(11)</sup>. Kesselring was also convinced of this, but I saw a different perspective: *“despite the agreement with the Italians, I knew very well - he wrote later - that Rommel, when he got an initial success would not have been arrested except when he met strong resistance from the enemy, which to me seemed right”*<sup>(12)</sup>. However do not openly throw off balance.

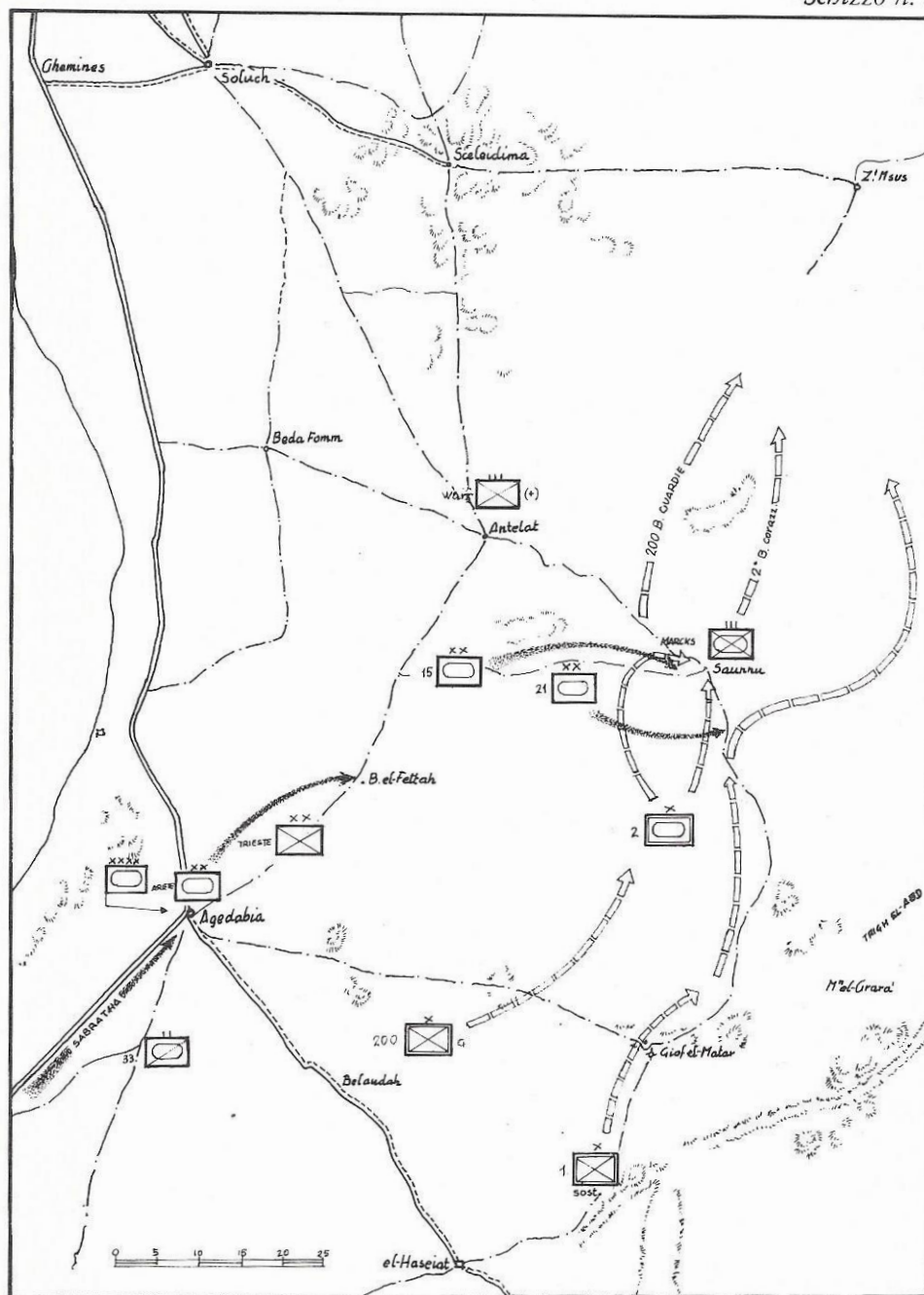
Did accept-with many mental reserves by Rommel-the principle of stopping just beyond Ajdabiya, Cavallero claimed that leaving undefended unit good positions of el Agheila and discontinue the already gathering of divisions of X and XXI Corps near the via Balbia. Rommel seemed to settle for the *Sabratha*, which was finalizing the influx to Ajdabiya, and received requests.<sup>(13)</sup>

*“I also expressed to the Gen. Rommel-continued Cavallero in his message to Mussolini-my reasoned opinion the purpose of his action must be to beat the disorganized enemy, even destroy, if possible, the enemy units that are within reach, but not achieve progress of territory that for now at least you come in our weakness”.*



GLI AVVENIMENTI DEL 23 GENNAIO

Schizzo n. 7



Apart from the operational concept, on which you will return, does not seem objective Rommel to accuse have territorial aspirations, just as a few weeks before had been accused of failing to respect for the land (Cyrenaica) that he was ready to surrender. Rommel's version is, of course, very different and it describes a useful comparison:

“Gen. Cavallero carried directives of the Duce for further operations. Everything was indicating that Rome was far from satisfied with counter-attack of the *Panzerarmee*. During the discussion, Cavallero said: “*Make a sortie, and then come back.*” No I accepted that and I answered that I was determined to get to grips with the enemy until I had allowed my troops and supplies; the *Panzerarmee* was moving again and his early hits were scored. We would be directed first to the South, and destroyed the enemy South of Agedabia; then East and finally North-East. I could always fall back on the Marsa el-Brega if things had gone wrong, but that interested me recently: my goal was much higher. Cavallero implored me not to proceed further. I said that nobody, except the Führer, could make me change my decision, because the fight was waged primarily by German troops.

Eventually, after a few attempts of Kesselring for support, Cavallero walked away muttering. Keep on Gen. von Rintelen to let him take a look at the battlefield, the next day. He had never moved from Rome and I tried to make him understand the need for this theatre of operations. Cavallero took revenge by blocking part of Italian Corps in Marsa el-Brega and part in Ajdabiya, away so at my command. Nevertheless, German forces retook Cyrenaica”<sup>(14)</sup>.

These lines were written clearly *in retrospect*. Apart from that-and leaving the ungrateful and ungenerous final phrase-is easy to observe, that probably both sides have provided an account of convenience. As condescending, Cavallero was unable to tolerate such open defiance of Directives and the “Duce”, compiled by him that same evening, were characterized by a reference, implicit or explicit, as revealed in the interview; and Rommel, however rough and decided, some had to observe a minimum of form, especially in the presence of Kesselring, especially since in the afternoon of the 23rd had not yet assured of a full success. On the other hand, you can assume a position of Rommel tough with the tongue.

The return flight, on the *Storch* flown by Kesselring, was started at dusk, so the landing took place at el Agheila, at night. To confirm what he had said, immediately drafted following Cavallero “Duce directives”:

"The conduct of the war in Tripolitania [?] is depending on the situation in the Mediterranean. And to predict that, because of the scarcity of fuel, starting from mid-February will be slower convoys and possibly a suspension. However to be expected that the effects of intensified action on Malta will facilitate much goodwill, already in progress, of individual vessels for the route of the West; but with this medium you will hardly guarantee the normal supply of colony and will be ruled out sending new troops and new means.

They also kept in mind the following possibilities:

- a) Landing of British and DeGaullist troops on the Libyan coast or in Tunisia.
- b) Enemy troops advanced in the Libyan Sahara.

Therefore, at least until the transport crisis is not exceeded, it is necessary to maintain the East Front forces gathered to complete the reorganization and not to expose them to a new attrition, which would not be possible to quickly write off. So too we must economize resources and supplies in anticipation of the crisis period.

Kept in mind the foregoing, the Duce ordered that until further order:

1. Our position of strength to the East is represented by Marsa Brega-Marada. Marada alignment must be strengthened;
2. The overall situation of the Mediterranean does not allow for time to think to move forward in our line-up;
3. Resistance indicated position at no. 1, infantry troops are the element that ensures the integrity of the defense; Mobile forces are operating element, in the context of tactical task assigned to no. 4;
4. To give our defense a distinct character and activities to disrupt the preparations of the enemy's attack, mobile forces will, when you present the opportunity, offensive operations limited range to beat the opponent that comes close to convenient reach; This task will cooperate particularly airpower;
5. Infantry units should not be diverted from the position of strength and there will have to wait to complete their reorganization.

The Duce reserves the right to amend this directive in relation to possible changes in the general situation.

Operational zone, January 23, 1942 ".

Has already been made a harsh critique of the above directives<sup>(15)</sup>, criticism on which one can only agree. Do not see the reason to give Mussolini directives as the Chief of the General staff had all titles to branch out on his own; the increase in offense on Malta had obviously nothing to do with the problem of scarcity of nafta; It is difficult to accept the statement about the impossibility of moving forward the device because of the "*overall situation in the Mediterranean*", when in Rome knew the serious damage inflicted on 19 December by special means of the R. Navy to the *Valiant* and *Queen Elizabeth*, in the port of Alexandria, and when Cavallero

He told Kesselring, on January 10: "*I believe that this diminished pressure of the enemy in the Mediterranean may last at least two months*"<sup>(16)</sup>. Furthermore, the assumptions on hostile intentions in Libya or Tunisia, or in the Sahara, though possible, could not be considered, at least at the moment, realistic.

In this respect it is good to explain that in terms of information, Italy had to own a great shot put recently to credit from SIM. In early December 1941, it had managed to photograph the *Black Code*, kept in the safekeeping of Col. Norman E. Fiske, American military attaché in Rome, with all top cipher tables, which allowed him to "read" each cipher dispatch with that code. Now, the U.S. military attaché in Cairo, Leut. Col. Frank Bonner Fellers, was very sloppy in Rome to report the news of military interest in the Middle East made for direct vision during trips to the front or in the course of talks with British military leaders (it seems that relations between the British and Americans were, especially after Pearl Harbour, a frankness even surprising) and of course his dispatches were intercepted and "reads". In this way the SIM was able to keep daily track both the Comando Supremo, Comando Superiore N.A. and the OBS, (which in turn informed Rommel directly). All data concerning the strength, attitude, availability and losses in tanks of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army to the command of the *Panzerarmee* between January and June 29, 1942 originates from Fellers reports.<sup>(17)</sup>

As regards operational vision of Cavallero and Bastico, while acknowledging the concerns based on the Italian infantry, you have to admit two serious flaws: a lack of sensitivity to the possibilities related to armored war in the desert and, above all, an excessive tendency to defensive. In practice, wherever the opponent had in fact withdraw or stop our forces, we determined an instinctive need to cling to positions, whose intrinsic value was notoriously its because they always worked around. If this was justified by evident need for reorganization of the tactical or logistic device, much less was waiting for "better times" or, according to the expression used in this case, of "possible changes of the general situation", when you knew full well that time playing for the enemy. There is a spark of strong-willed about directives, but more or less good times turned that still leave a sense of painful discomfort. Perhaps the issue transcended the individual characters and we must talk about mindset; in the end, the directives issued by the Comando Supremo for the war imposed on the defensive 51.

It was the mindset of those who, finding himself in trouble and judging materials these difficulties not attributable to himself, takes a tranquility far closer to fatalism than the desire to solve the problem that it closely. But the difficult problems are not solved, by placing on the knees of Jupiter, especially war, otherwise we think the enemy to solve them.

For completeness of investigation, we must point out that there is in the record, in correspondence of the Comando Supremo, a note inside (likely for Mussolini's information) from the "transactions in N.A.", compiled on January 27, to return to Rome by Cavallero. In that the "Duce" directives sent to Rommel and Bastico are shown as derived from an assessment of the situation quite different from that which results from other documents<sup>(18)</sup> and above all by the same "Directives". It seems evident adding items note on the 27<sup>th</sup> and not the 23<sup>rd</sup>, as well as the influence of the dispatch that the send to Mussolini the 26<sup>th</sup> sent to Cavallero, still in Libya, to leave "*a certain latitude Rommel for further movement*"<sup>(19)</sup>. Indeed the 27<sup>th</sup> Cavallero will authorize the development of operations and the eventual occupation of Benghazi.

As if that weren't enough, there was against the ally (which, moreover, was not free from serious wrongs in our regard) an attitude sometimes cryptic. For example, it is reported, without comment, Cavallero's answer to Marras that the OKW, asked the Italian appreciation on the situation in Libya:

"This Comando Supremo agrees that the British are doing flow towards Syrta all forces available for an attack in depth from el Agheila, without, however, excluding partial estimates attacks. Our defense, facilitated by the nature of the ground, is essentially tied to the speed of the reorganization of our divisions. For this and for the necessary development of logistics equipment, fundamental element is the transport yield from Italy, itself bound by the provision of nafta. Ultimately, if nafta assignments will be tailored to the needs, this Comando Supremo is directed to assess with confidence the future developments of the situation in North Africa. Cavallero"<sup>(20)</sup>.

On the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> accommodation of the Corps of Maneuver was not yet completed. The bulk of the *Sabratha* Division had been slowed by the difficulty of removing the many existing mines on Balbia and South of Agedabia; then he could not release the *Ariete* if not overnight. He derived the inconvenience of an inevitable confusion caused by crossing, in those conditions, between units of *Sabratha*

in arrival and those of the *Ariete* departing. What contributed to allow other British units to escape northward.

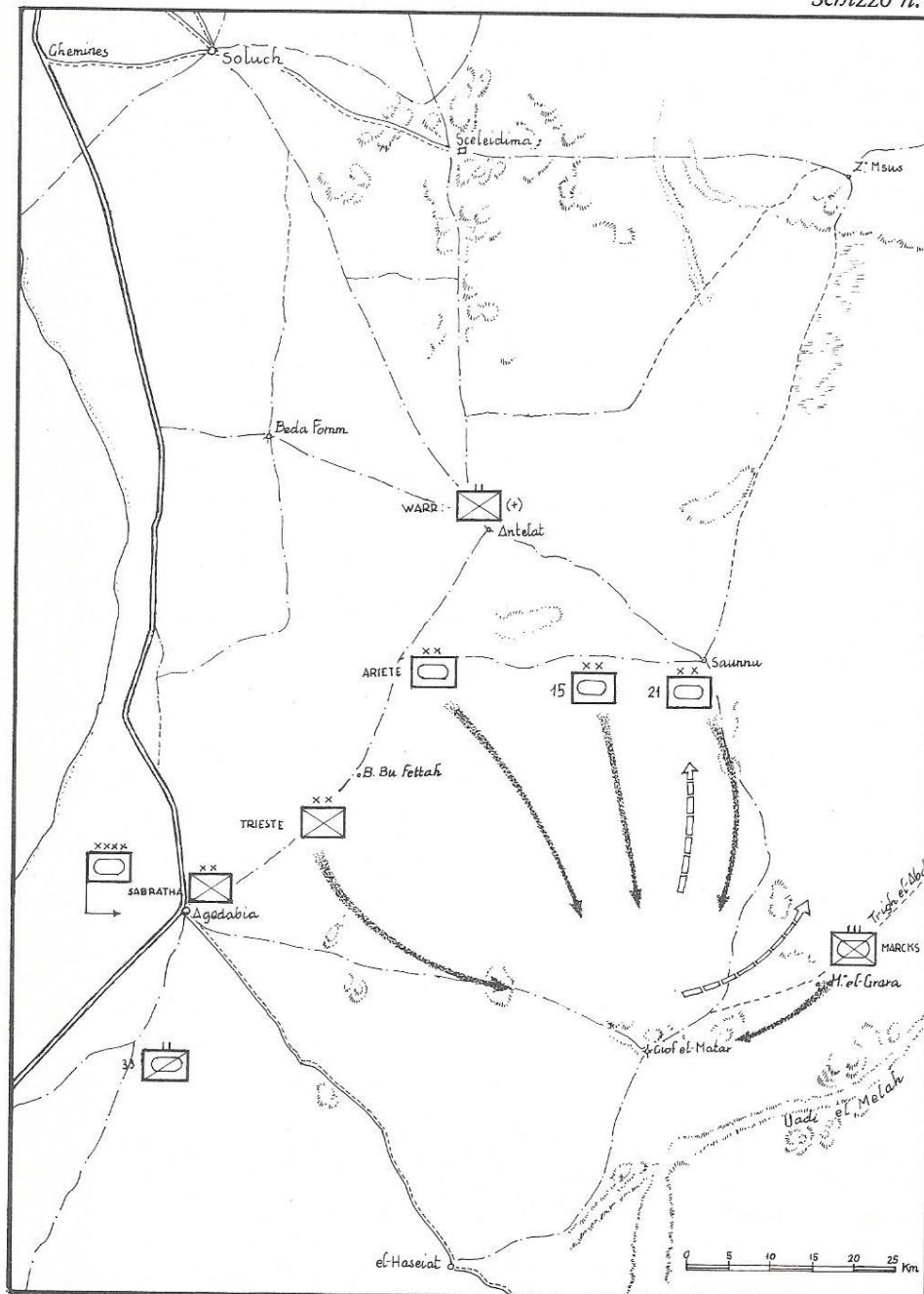
On 24 January, it was a day practically wasted for Rommel. As he was still convinced that much of the 1st Armored Division was still trapped in the area of Giof el-Matar, in the early hours of the morning sent out orders for the hoped for annihilation: the CAM, the DAK and Marcks grouping had to aim for with concentric movement on locality and liquidate the bunch (diagram no. 8). The lack of focus of Italian divisions and 90th light was filled with the decentralization of most groups of the 8th artillery corps. The early movement was staggered over time to achieve the contemporaneousness of stress on the objective. The *Afrikakorps*, from Saunnu and Antelat, was at starting 07:00, the Corps of Maneuver at 09:00. Rommel would be with the left wing of the deployment.

On the two armored Corps began their advance. *“The movement proceeds with gradual speed-reports the historical diary of the CAM-but no trace of the enemy. Fresh tracks of British vehicles with tendency to the Southeast-Northwest give the feeling that once again has managed to escape. Interrogations of Arabs confirm this feeling, because all agree that the enemy has withdrawn into the night”*. Around 14:00 Rommel, arrived in Giof el-Matar, had to admit that he had made a hole in the water, since the rioting could not be considered decisive. He returned in flight to his Command and, while armored corps returning starting positions, studied what to do. To the point where they were things, not remained that throwing the opponent on his heels and go in motion. So that the next morning the CAM complemented the deployment to keep the towns of Antelat and Ajdabiya, while the DAK was directed on Msus. The bulletin issued by the *Panzerarmee* was triumphant: the concentric attack of Italian-German armored forces in the North-East of Ajdabiya had full success. From the 21<sup>st</sup> to 24 Jan., at least 143 tanks and armored cars and 80 pieces were captured or destroyed, and in facts about 1,000 prisoners”.

By contrasting moods were the British. Recent events had persuaded Godwin-Austen that situation in Western Cyrenaica began to be heavy. Now, seen clearly that the combative capacity of *Panzerarmee* had been underestimated, but this would inconvenience him. The worst was that the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored did not seem able to block an enemy advance on Msus will protect the left flank of the 4th Indian Division. Therefore, he asked the command of 8th Army freedom of action

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to move to Mechili, in case it had outlined a serious threat. Ritchie did not agree. In his view, there was still room for maneuver against an opponent who could not but be close to exhaustion. So the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp had to collect around to Msus and Benghazi, ready to react dynamically. However Ritchie should not feel, deep down, very safe, because it ended finally authorizing Godwin-Austen to avoid your opponent, if necessary; and even invited to begin the withdrawal of the services of the two divisions, as well as to prepare a demolition plan. At the same time, the Gen Norrie, Commander of 30<sup>th</sup> Corps, received provisions to identify a line of temporary resistance between Gazala and Tobruk.

Of course, Godwin-Austen continued to fear that his highest card, Armored Division, went to find its hands full in a series of exhausting fighting that eventually would overwhelm. Ultimately, he refocused Messervy to delay as much as possible the Italian-German progression but without risking losing his brigades; Indeed, if the circumstances had become dangerous, could withdraw up to el-Mechili. In this case, Tucker would abandon Benghazi taking refuge in the *gebel*. For his part, Ritchie referred to Auchinleck that withdraw hypothesis had purely protective nature.

It was for this that the Commander in Chief of the Middle East telegraphed to Churchill in reassuring tone:

“(...) The enemy was able clearly to keep at the forefront of higher than expected and actual his initial advance seems to have disorganized, temporarily anyway, our advanced units. The latter, which, as you already know, were very weak, were wiped off the main road (...). Once again Rommel made a reckless shot (...). Probably the unexpected early success encouraged him, as happened last year, to go farther than he had in mind originally. This time the situation of his supplies is not in any way comparable with that of last year, when, apart from the rest, he had fresh troops. The situation took on the developments which I would have wanted, but I hope that it can finally turn to our advantage<sup>(21)</sup>.

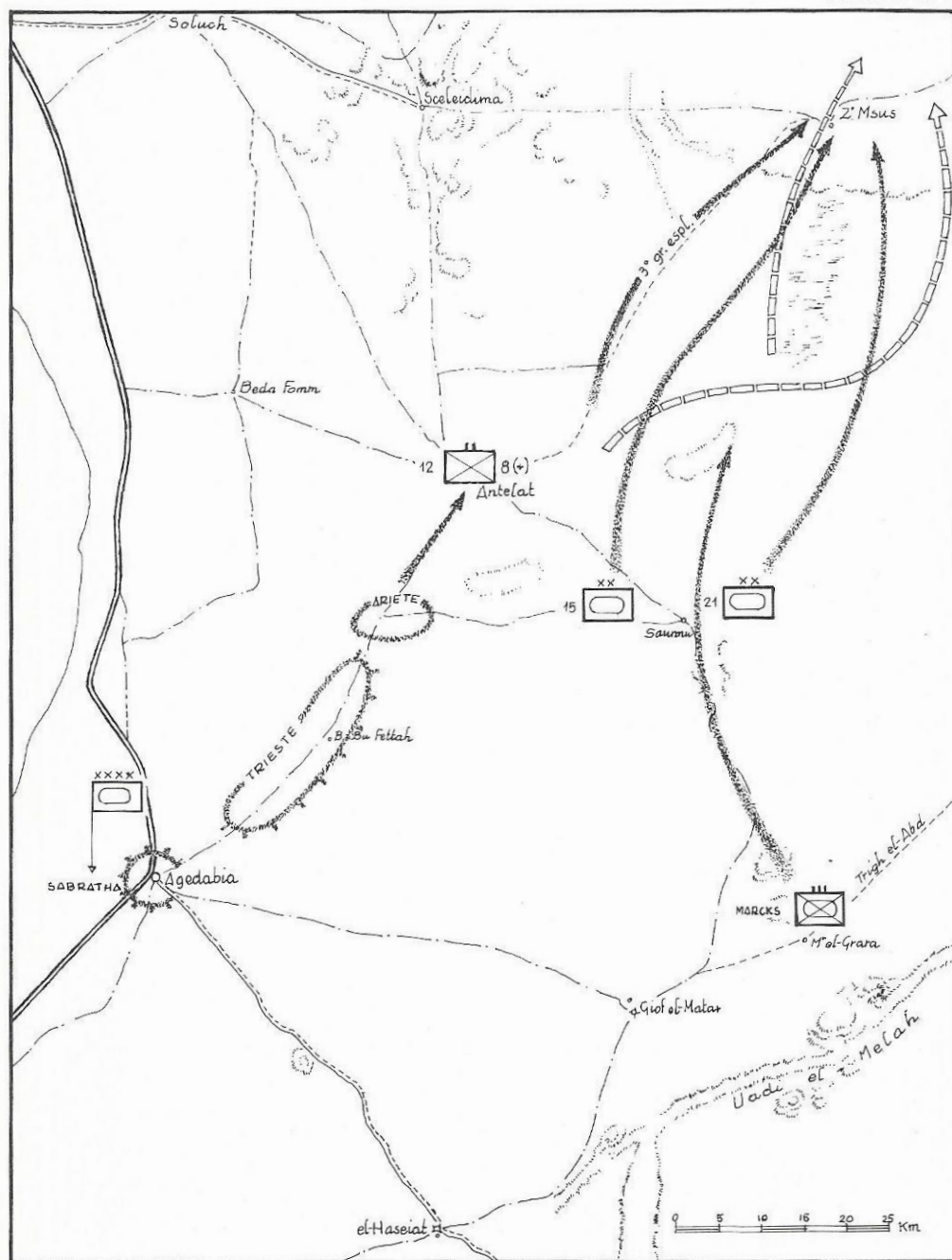
At sunrise on 25 January, the divisions of the CAM set in motion (sketch No. 9). At 10:00 the *Trieste* was stretched on the track of Antelat, between 8 km and 36 km, facing east-northeast; the *Ariete* was between 36 km and Antelat (but had many tanks strewn, for damage, between Marsa el-Brega and Ajdabiya); the *Sabratha*, passed below Zingales, maintain Ajdabiya. The first to encounter the enemy was the *Afrikakorps*,



The events of January 25

GLI AVVENIMENTI DEL 25 GENNAIO

Schizzo n. 9



departing at the 07:00, in two columns, to try to engage in good time the British tanks.

The 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* found little resistance in the East of the track for Msus, but, on the left, the Panzer 15<sup>th</sup> stumbles into the British 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade, for about ten kilometers Northwest of Saunnu. The lion's share was the prerogative of the 8th *Panzerregiment*, which invested the opponent at full speed, having good game on Briggs units, lacking in serious combat experience and soon demoralized by the vehement attack. Defeated, the “*British columns fled madly for the desert in one of the war's most extraordinary retreat*”<sup>(22)</sup>. At 11:00 the 15th Panzer reached the airport of Msus, sweeping in its convoy of various kinds and capturing 20 aircraft intact. Good luck that makes the entire Brigade of the Guards is not surrounded, however the British rush halted at el-Charruba, more than sixty kilometers north of Msus where Messervy's troops gathered in a State of complete disarray. The 2nd Armored Brigade was left with some 40 tanks and cannons.<sup>(23)</sup>

Godwin-Austen had seen the confirmation of their fears. In the evening, therefore, Messervy ordered to continue until el-Mechili and Toker leaving Benghazi. But, in the afternoon, Auchinleck had arrived by plane at Tmimi, willing to see things up close, as well as in November was during the fort Maddalena when operation *Crusader* seemed on the verge of failure right from the start. With him was Air Marshal Tedder, Commander in Chief of the *Royal Air Force* in the Middle East. The two generals discussed the situation with Ritchie and unanimous was that Rommel had reached at Msus in the wake of a success exceeding his own expectations and that there were still way and time to repulse it on the positions of Marsa el-Brega. Ritchie then rescinded the orders sent by Godwin-Austen for the retreat of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp and assumed direct command of the 4th Indian Division. Then led an attack plan: the 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade from the West and the 1st Armored Division, with 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, from the North were to converge on Msus, where was found the bulk of the *Afrikakorps*. Since the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade would not be ready until the afternoon of 28<sup>th</sup> or 29<sup>th</sup> in the morning, until then the 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade would have disturbed the opposing lines of communication “*to the North-East of Ajdabiya*” with mobile columns and the 1st Armored Division would protect the left of Toker along more than 60 kilometers of exist between Chaulan and el-Abiar. Ritchie also ordered that the Polish Brigade leave Derna and occupy Mechili, when would be

reached by the 1<sup>st</sup> Free French Brigade and the 150<sup>th</sup> British Brigade was to move to Bir Tengeder.

Godwin-Austen, which had based his decision to cede space to the conditions of the troops, was wounded by the order of the superior, much to send them a message of protest against the new plan and the lack of confidence. “*Ritchie-observed later-he had a tendency to ask for your opinion and to act, after receiving it, in a totally opposite*”<sup>(24)</sup>. But the Commander of the 8th Army felt no objections and argued that Rommel was in serious logistical difficulties and therefore it was necessary to “*take more vigorous offensive regardless of the risks implicit in it*”.

The *Panzerarmee* was now a really necessary: it had to collect, obtain, retrieve damaged tanks and gather the bulk loot abandoned on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, Cavallero had gone to Tripoli to examine the situation there exists and that day he was joined by two dispatches from Rome. The first was from Gen Magli, the Supreme Command:

“From interceptions of Amé is communicated on the 18<sup>th</sup> (I say eighteen). Begins. British not having a armored force & nor even the logistical facilities necessary to progress further into Libya. Therefore Rommel can easily keep where come around. Ends. The above message for knowledge”<sup>(25)</sup>.

The other was of Mussolini:

“Your telegrams Received. On the basis of general elements, one of which very important there has been transmitted by telegram from General Magli, & your directives to General Rommel are antecedents to the situation resulting from the data of today's bulletin (25 January), I will agree that both & you well to leave the General Rommel a certain latitude for further movement”<sup>(26)</sup>.

Cavallero's response was the following: “To the Duce. I do care say that General Rommel has shared your name given directives & will conform his action sequel. Verbally communicate details”<sup>(27)</sup>. Does not appear to have made telephone contact with Bastico. The next morning he returned to Rome by plane.

## 2. THE RECONQUEST OF WESTERN CYRENAICA

The day of 26 January, dominated by a huge *ghibli*, was dedicated to the reorganization of the *Panzerarmee* and gathering information on the enemy. The remains of the British 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division were reported in the area of el-Mechili, where displaced also seemed to command of 13th Corps. The alignment Ghemines- Soluch -Sceleidima were advanced elements were of the 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, while the line el-Abiar-el Charruba seemed to have pushed patrols of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade. Also you had news, for the first time, the 1st French light Division to the West of Derna. Based on this framework, were made by German reconnaissance Northwest of Msus and up to thirty kilometers west of el-Mechili and Bir Tengeder, but without finding traces of the opponent.

Rommel had attempted to take back the plan that had brought in 1941, in a dizzying race to the border. Pointing with rapidity on el-Benghazi and Mechili would block the *gebel*, but this time there were too many difficulties for supply. So, reluctantly, he gave up the idea and stationed himself on a lesser alternative: Benghazi. The maneuver was pretty simple, but included a move intended to deceive the enemy, as in fact happened. At first it was block Benghazi by the CAM to the South and East with Marcks grouping, while the DAK would make a feint toward el-Mechili to believe such a repeat of the previous counteroffensive. At a later stage, it would be granted occupation of the city, in relation to the events. At 08:00, then summoned Zingales to tell him that the next day the *Sabratha* was to move to Antelat in order to disengage the Corps of Maneuver, and the 28th the *Ariete* and the Trieste were directed first to Sceleidima and then on Soluch-Ghemines where they stopped. Then he called Crüwell and turned for expertise.

Meanwhile the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet and *Fliegerführer Afrika* took advantage of the pause to bring forward an share of the fighters being exceeded the limit of autonomy of the units.

In Rome, Cavallero was quick to get acquainted with Mussolini about contacts with Bastico and Rommel and imposed to address. Then he presided over a meeting attended by the chiefs of staff of the R. Navy and R. Air force, Chief of staff of the R. Army Transport Office (Col. Di Raimondo) and, from the German side, Kesselring and von Rintelen, Weichold. The subject was

the burning issue: transport overseas. Cavallero premise that the situation in Libya could offer from one moment to the next opportunity to be exploited. Adm. Riccardi formulated two major objections: difficulty of nafta and closure of the route of the Levant. The first, of course, cannot be solved entirely, making it necessary to establish a priority and supplies for Northern Africa had precedence over all. The second could and should have been resolved with the intervention of aviation for the escort and particularly to battered fields of Benghazi sector. And so was established.

There was also another solution: point terrestrially on Benghazi and its airports. But Cavallero there felt much from that ear. "*Ciano tells us - wrote in his diary - Things go well and you could go even further, but did not agree (...). Should not push the enemy too far its bases, otherwise we are we in crisis for supplies.*"

In command of the British 8<sup>th</sup> army, at Tmimi, the atmosphere wasn't too calm. Uncertainty of operations had added a vehement message of Churchill to Auchinleck:

"I am distressed for a reports that comes to us from the 8<sup>th</sup> army, where it comes to vacate Benghazi and Derna. Certainly, I have never been led to assume that a similar situation could occur. This eastward motion of non-combatant personnel and proclaiming that in Benghazi has ordered so far to carry out demolitions provide an ongoing campaign absolutely unexpected appearance; which we haven't but taken into account. You have really suffered a severe defeat at Antelat? Our new armored vehicles were unable to compete with the resurrected German tanks? It seems this very severe crisis and totally unexpected for me. Why on earth should be in trouble so quickly? Because the Anglo-Indian 4th Division did not resist in Benghazi, as did the Huns at Halfaya? A withdraw like that going on evidently designed by junior officers, implies the failure of operation *Crusader* and the ruin of operation *Acrobat*"  
(28)

Auchinleck was annoyed, especially for the 1st Armored Division's inability to resist *Panzerdivisionen* with a certain continuity. It was that it was rejected beyond Wsus without having played all his cards. He went on too fast, in his opinion, evacuation of Benghazi, albeit limited to heavier services units. However, he shared the thought of attack: understand that the 8<sup>th</sup> Army ran a big risk, but-as in a confided in a long letter to Gen. Dorman-Smith, his Chief of staff remained in Cairo-even the enemy ran and to a greater extent. It was necessary to completely regain the initiative as soon as possible and an action

of force was the only way to get it. At the lower level, however, the opinion was different. That day the commanders from the 1st Armored and 4th Indian represented to Ritchie series concerns. Messervy declared that with the forty tanks that were efficient was able, at the very least, to stay at el-Charruba and patrol the el-Abiar with armored cars; and Toker observed that with the only Brigade at hand did not believe they could achieve a great success in the action planned. Of course, Ritchie confirmed the orders given.

On the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup>, Rommel called the Gen. Gambara to own command. The presence of officers of the General staff of the two controls, Italian and German, just hatched the situation and to point out how the opponent seemed uncertain what to do. He could gather at Charruba to attack the *Afrikakorps*, if this was directed at Mechili. *"For us it would be good to go too, but there we go-he said-.There is no doubt that following the surprise of our initiative, the enemy lost any offensive ambitions; lost huge depots, many vehicles and 46 tanks ongoing repair. There were also American tanks manufactured in 1941. On the other hand our losses in men and tanks are minimal."* Then expressed a keen satisfaction for the work of the CAM and asked Zingales for a searching.<sup>(29)</sup> Left alone with Gambara, Marchesi and Gen. Calvi di Bergolo, connecting with the *Panzerarmee*, Rommel briefly expounded his operational thinking.

Given the apparent confusion in the British Command and of the tendency to form a defensive line in the *gebel*, from Derna to Mechili, continue all the way to Bir Tengeder, had decided to move forward with mobile forces, the next day, in the direction of Benghazi, to beat the 4th Indian Division and capture the large depot of materials existing therein. The *Sabratha* and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light would have deployed the alignment Beda Fomm-Antelat-Saunnu, putting in place, as centers of fire, all armored war prizes means. Ensured that when the operation is completed, would turn the CAM and the DAK at the back of this line, to proceed to their recovery and allow the men to rest. If the enemy had evacuated the entire area of Benghazi, he merely to maintain contact with elements and with other units (the paratroopers) would have proceeded to the occupation of Gialo, which was weakly defended. The X and XXI Corps were not to leave the positions of Marsa el Brega-Marada<sup>(30)</sup>.

It is legitimate to have many doubts about the sincerity of Rommel to retreat

after Benghazi. And some even Gambarà, who had been authorized by Bastico decide sitting right under the directives of Cavallero, was rather skeptical, though, or because they believe that however Rommel would act in his own way or because prone to real conquest of Benghazi, saw fit to give the allowance of Comando Superiore. Back at el Agheila referred to Bastico, which approved the policy cited. But at 21:00 arrived an encrypted message from Rome.

During the night, the information service had collected a Reuter Agency issued note at 23:40 on January 24 from Cairo that was manifested the intention of Rommel to recover all of Cyrenaica and push the 8th Army into the desert of Marmarica. *“Benghazi is threatened- to add the communiqué - The two roads that run between Benghazi and Barce are threatened (...) should not arouse astonishment if announced our next retreat from Benghazi.”* Taking knowledge of the note, Cavallero received von Rintelen. Knowing this unwillingness to “adventures”, reiterated the appropriateness of maintaining the “center of gravity” of *Panzerarmee* in Ajdabiya, although the enemy had cleared Benghazi, and to maintain the steady occupation of the defensive position at el Agheila. The Duce sees them willingly use the “*occupation of Benghazi politically*” admitted however<sup>(31)</sup>. Ultimately, sent to the Comando Superiore an authorization with constraint:

“(...) Duce authorizes occupation of the Benghazi area with a limited share of the mobile forces, but move from Ajdabiya the center of gravity of the mass armor, whose job is to directive established in on 23 January, directives that are confirmed. After Benghazi area occupied, give immediately beginning to the extent possible at work clearing the port (...)”<sup>(32)</sup>.

Frankly, it looks very questionable. Keep the city-and to begin the work needed to the port “occupy”- “*with a limited share of the mobile forces*” is an expression that lends itself to different interpretations: a reinforced Division more or less? An *ad hoc* grouping? A strong tactical group? Much more clearly defined was Rommel's thought: “*keep in touch with exploring elements*”. Secondly, from Benghazi to Ajdabiya run over 150 kilometers as the crow flies and slightly less from Ajdabiya to el Agheila. The support, indeed confirm that, in the operational situation created and with what it knew of the opponent, the armor continued to run “*restricted-range offensive operations to beat the opponent that comes close to convenient reach*”, which «*maneuvering*» element of defensive organization of el Agheila, is hardly acceptable concept strategic planning, tactical and even logistically.

The fact is that Cavallero wanted to stay at el Agheila, but did not dare upset Mussolini who wanted Benghazi (especially known as abandoned by the English), nor could impose on Rommel, for whom a return to el Agheila was considered as the last resort.

The directive was also transmitted to Rommel directly from von Rintelen, but had no influence on the development of events.<sup>(33)</sup>

At 17:30 of that 27 January the CAM started marching towards to achieve throughout the night of departure: the crossroads of Cardasi el-Oti, about 18 kilometers south of Sceleidima. The movement, with the *Trieste* in the lead, is made by midnight, overcoming the difficulty opposing sensitive frequent showers that cause the vehicles. The Marcks Grouping strengthened by 3<sup>rd</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bns took to Siret el-Maezil, about 30 kilometers northeast of Sceleidima.

The violent sandstorms of those days had severely limited the aerial reconnaissance, but two *Tomahawk* sighted the German deception movement towards el-Mechili and gave the alarm. He was later caught the repositioning of the CAM, deemed secondary effort, however. However, Ritchie became convinced that the *Panzerarmee* was attacking on two divergent routes. "*The enemy has divided his forces-he wrote-and is weaker than we are in two areas. The watchword is attack everywhere*"<sup>(34)</sup>. And ordered the 4th Indian attacked the Italian column and the 1st Armored to drive behind the Germans.

On 28 January, at dawn, the Corps of Maneuver began marching in two columns, the *Ariete* on the left and the *Trieste* to the right (sketch No. 10). Around noon, the redoubt of Sceleidima, settled the ballistic contact. At the same time, the 90th Light, who had carried on via Balbia, began slowly to rise northwards and Marcks grouping set its sights on Regima.

On the positions of Ghemines, and Sceleidima Suluq was ready an part of the 4th Indian Division. Gen. Taker, in fact, had on hand only the 7th Brigade, and a group tactical mechanized formation transferred from the 5th. It wasn't defense oriented in Benghazi, but attacking toward Antelat, as directed by Ritchie (the action was scheduled for the 29<sup>th</sup>), therefore had established three motorized columns by subtracting much of the Brigade transport's, which thus remained immobilized, or nearly so, at Barce. Recon elements were at el-Abiar.

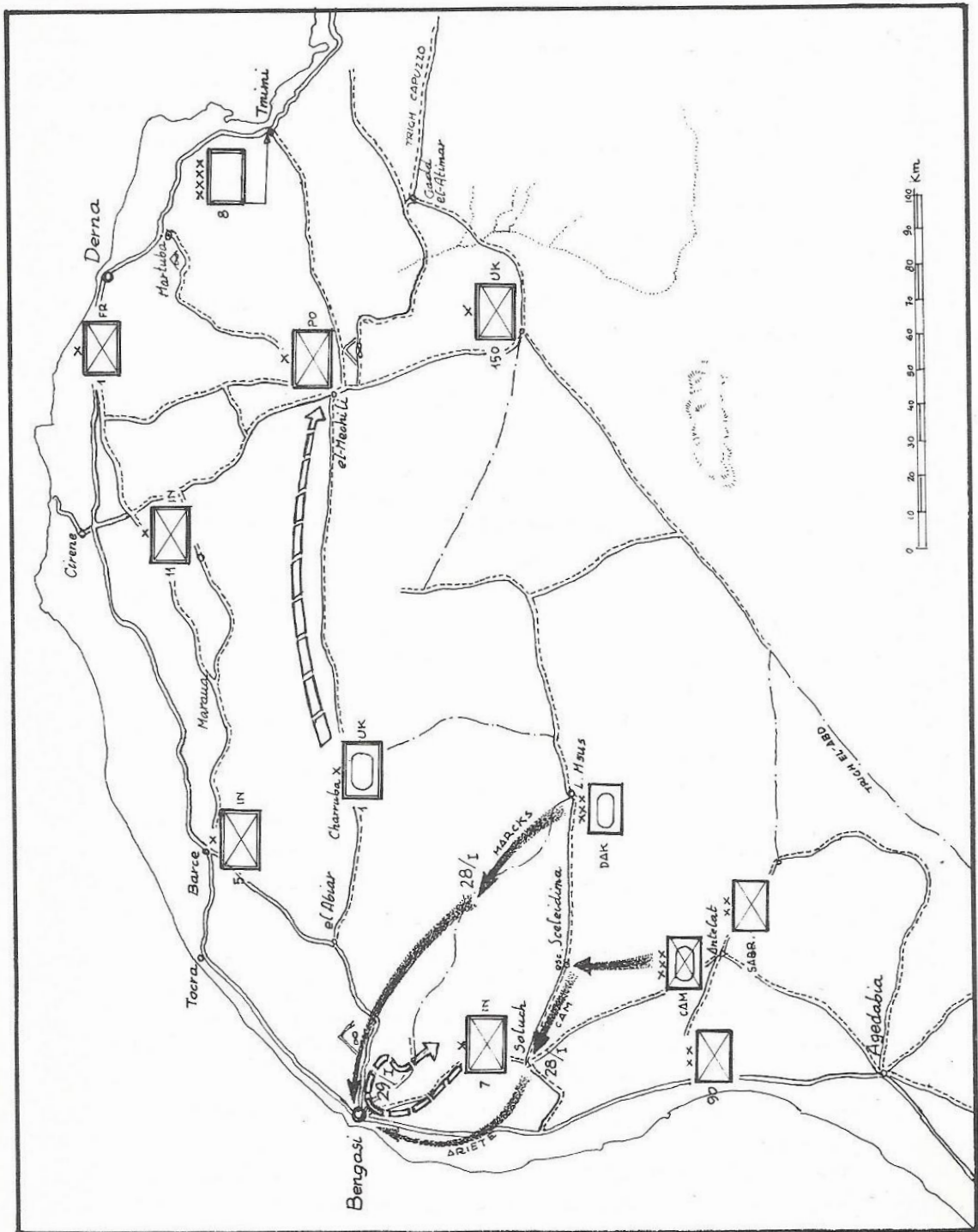
When the *Trieste* began to deploy to envelop Sceleidima,



The events of 28 and 29 January

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Schizzo n. 10



and the *Ariete* stopped to move from the opposite side, Tucker made a fairly precise idea of how they were putting things and asked the command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, from which now depended, to entrust to the 1st Armored Division's task is to stop the formation enemy on the road, as he believed, toward el-Abiar. The army welcomed or showed him accepting the request, but the 1st Armored Division, remained under the orders of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp was moving against the alleged *Afrikakorps* offensive, i.e. in the other direction. That there was poor perception of current events in the British Command seems unquestionable and eluded the tendency not Auchinleck of majority. Just that morning had turned to Churchill in confident tone:

"The enemy has divided their forces, apparently in an attempt to both the conquest of Mechili as that of Benghazi. And a bold move, typically in the style of Rommel, which may indicate an understatement for his part of our ability to resist and attack. Probably, most of its tanks pointed toward the East. His movements, except perhaps that heading for Benghazi, have not upsets counteroffensive plans previously designed by General Ritchie"<sup>(35)</sup>

To calm Churchill we wanted more. Commented: "*at this point it was perfectly clear to me that General Auchinleck had not understood until then what had happened in the desert*"<sup>(36)</sup> and, while renewing their moral support, he asked questions again on the "defeat" suffered by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade.

It was shortly before 13:00 that Tucker, speaking with Ritchie, learned the inability to rely on the involvement of Messervy and rightly proposed to give up the fight and to evacuate the fort since the 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade had informed to have in front of the CAM at Sceleidima and units of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzerdivision* (in reality it was a battalion of the Marcks grouping) East, for about thirty kilometres from el-Abiar or Regima. Ritchie agreed reluctantly and Tucker gave away the plan of port demolitions, which, however, was just a beginning of implementation.

Meanwhile, however, Sceleidima had fallen: after a short fight the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri was occupied the fort at 14:30 and captured the garrison. Zingales then dispose that the 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri of the *Ariete* continue immediately on Suluq chasing the escaped units by an enveloping action of the *Ariete*. At 17:00 departed all the Corps of Maneuver, with *Trieste* in second row. Less than three hours later Suluq was reached and by midnight the two divisions we joined.

If in the South the 7th Indian Brigade had managed to retreat on Benghazi without big losses, in the East the situation quickly turned for the worse. Rommel

in persona appeared alongside Col. Marcks, urged him to occupy the Benina airport (16:00 hours) and to block the Benghazi-el Abiar road, running on an embankment lined with two deep moats, which made it impossible to get out of the way. Some units, including the Division Command and tactical group of the 5th Brigade, had already escaped but the B echelon of the 7th Brigade were caught by a hail of fire that shocked the head of immobilizing column and torching vehicles, boils in ditches and paralyzing any movement of trucks as well as the possibility of arrival of infantry divisions. The Brigade Commander, Gen. H.R. Briggs<sup>(37)</sup>, no link with the command of the Division, then took a radical decision: he ordered his three columns (altogether about 4,100 men) to head Southeast of Benghazi, toward the desert, through the Italian-German positions, in large intervals between the axes of movement followed by Axis troops. Starting at midnight, an absolute prohibition of using the radio. Although he lost the brigade to the superior commands, columns managed to pass, despite sporadic clashes, and to reach Mechili and Bir Tengeder after various adventures.

On 29 January the match to Benghazi had ended. At 04:30 a tactical group of the *Ariete* departed from Suluq and arrived at Ghemines at 07:30, without encountering Indian resistance nor a trace of the 90th Light and hung back on Balbia.

Without orders from the Commander of *Panzerarmee* to the destruction of the radio station during the battle of Sceleidima, Zingales decided to start the *Ariete* on Benghazi and employ *Trieste* for a big roundup of area between Ghemines and Suluq, where you had news of enemy motorized elements (the columns of the 7th Indian Brigade). But meanwhile the Marcks grouping had forced the few defenses, taking Benghazi (11:30 a.m.) and capturing a thousand prisoners. Rommel had won, but once again had escaped the mail.

Lost city, Ritchie was undeterred. He thought that the pursuit of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp would not have started so early and, on the other hand, had not at all given up to react. First hoped to be able to achieve a static defense consisting from Derna and Mechili to Bir Tengeder. The southern flank was entrusted to the 1st Armored Division.

That day Auchinleck wrote to Dorman-Smith:

“(…) We must face the fact that unless you conquer the superiority on the battlefield with better cooperation between weapons and armored forces better conduct than it appears to be the

this, we can forget any idea of mounting an offensive, because our armored forces are still unable to encircle the enemy in open terrain, even when numerically superior to him.

Another serious aspect that you are imposing more and more is the growth of an inferiority complex among our armored forces (...). This is extremely dangerous and it will be very difficult to eradicate it, once it has caught on, as I fear is happening (...).

Before we can actually do something against the Germans on the ground, they will have plenty of time to get back in place in the equipment, organization and training (...).

As you know, I'm not prone to pessimism, but I see our current situation with apprehension, concerning our chances of taking the offensive on a massive scale. However, we must do our best to put things right. Please, do go to Gott and Lumsden and discuss the matter with them frankly or brutally, at your choice. Isn't it time of fine manners!"<sup>(38)</sup>.

For the Axis back to Benghazi was evidently one stage and the way in which it was made to look past induced, especially since it was the impression of a widespread trend towards abandonment of Cyrenaica by the English. Furthermore, Rommel was far less reckless than any thought. Of course, now he felt well supported. Hitler had made known to assume supreme command requires the employment of Benghazi and the aviation fields in the area, as well as a convenient "*line east of Derna*"<sup>(39)</sup> and happy for the initiative of his general, had announced, in a major speech on the radio, was promoted to Colonel-General. However, objectively, was urging reordering of motorized and armored units and the spoils of those days was about; Secondly, the news on the enemy provided a framework-on paper-could not be considered with some caution. On *gebels* was indicated the presence of two Armored Regiments, of the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Division (with the 5th and 11th Brigade) and the 8th *Royal Tanks* in the central area, more or less at the height of Cyrene; the British 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade and a South African Brigade in the Derna area; an armored car Regiment, of the French light Division and the Polish Brigade at el-Mechili; of the 29<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade at Bir Tengeder, of 1<sup>st</sup> support group, of 1<sup>st</sup> *Royal Tanks* and the 200<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Guards near Tmimi; the remains of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade at Gazala. In influx, then, were established the 2<sup>nd</sup> South African Division and the 1st Armored Brigade. Also giving to good identification of the unit, obviously what most mattered was the real texture of them. Now, the hasty withdrawal, long abandoned, the material shows disorganization produced in the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, were undeniably comforting,

but a calculation summary provided as probable 150-200 British tanks and armored cars against 186 tanks (including 80 Italians) and 30 armored cars of the *Panzerarmee*. However had landed in Tripoli, and already started to Cyrenaica, another contingent of about 100 Italian and German tanks. The comparison between the opposing air forces was based on an estimate of British 300 fighters and 250 bombers against 150 fighters and bombers of 100 (aside from 2<sup>nd</sup> *Luftflotte*). All things considered, Rommel decided to confine itself, for the time being, to press against the opponent on the *Jebel*, using Marcks grouping and the 33rd Recon Bn on Barce -Cyrene-Derna and with the new Geissler grouping<sup>(40)</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn on Maraua-Berta-Derna, and preserve the *Afrikakorps* in Msus, so leave Ritchie in uncertainty. Control of the occupied area was entrusted to *Ariete* (Benghazi, with elements at Tocra and Barce), *Trieste* (Ghemines, and Sceleidima Suluq), Sabratha (Antelat and Saunnu) and 90th Light (Maraua), but the problem was solved in half.

On the evening of 31 January addressed to Cavallero Bastico a resentful telegram:

“Excellency Calvi notified me at this time that General Rommel would have telegraphed the Duce asking consent advancing infantry divisions in connection with the new situation. Apart from the purely technical issue that, given note serious transport deficiencies, puts us first very complicated problem, I can not but detect little remarkable attitude that also connects to the fact of not having General Rommel ever posted at the Comando Superiore communications direct about holding parts, about its place Command ignored not only by us, but even by commands from him directly dependent. I understand that in the current state of affairs must move between Saunnu-Giof el-Matar Antelat & Benghazi infantry troops, as seems to be understanding but Rommel would be grateful if Your Excellency would point out at those who have that that decision, in view of the responsibility that I compete, always in the orbit of your Excellency's directives, it would be up to me exclusively”<sup>(41)</sup>.

Bastico was right on form; however the thing sounds a bit strange, not least because there were no precedents of the sort by part of Rommel. Maybe he had manifested their intention by his own Staff or, more likely, wanted to get to Mussolini vicariously. On 28 January, in fact, had come to Rome for a one-week visit a character of great relief, Hermann Goering, who did not ask to consult Mussolini and Cavallero to order the *Panzerarmee* to rush to take Tobruk. The first, subjected to a series of grandiose assurances on the contribution of the *Luftwaffe's* transport of materials for the conquest of the fort,

you willingly followed suit with the idea. The second, on the other hand, opposed it outright because of the logistical situation. The same von Rintelen tried to convince Goering of practice make it impossible to continue the advance and, specifically, of hope in the rapid fall of Tobruk. *"They do also-recalled-the aggressiveness of Rommel wanted arrested, not spurred on. He told me that Mussolini would be rejuvenated by two years if Tobruk was retaken"*<sup>(42)</sup>.

In this climate, Cavallero responded immediately to Bastico, denying that anyone had received a telegram to Mussolini and posting, to good account, new directives. The main task of the forces in Libya was to *"ensure at any time and in any situation the defense of Tripolitania"*, therefore the position at el Agheila was to be kept with at least two infantry divisions. Other major units could be shifted to echelon, ensuring the continuation of their reorganization. The occupation of Western Cyrenaica was limited only to *"provide protection in Benghazi"*, therefore mechanized forces could take advantage of the situation with a wide-ranging maneuver, provided that at the end of the operation, they hired a location in line with what has been said previously. In explaining that the constraint was caused by the fact that *"our supplies via the Mediterranean are and will remain difficult, especially for near-total exhaustion availability nafta"*<sup>(43)</sup>, Cavallero expressed the desire that Rommel indicate clearly what he intended to do and where he thought to gather the mass of armor.

The two German groups, meanwhile, is off in *gebel* without nourishing many concerns nor encountering serious resistance. On the evening of 1 February Marcks was at the village of d'Annunzio and Geissler at Maraua, while, even further, the 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn touched Beda Littoria and 3<sup>rd</sup> reached the village De Martino. Cyrene was resumed on the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and at 13:00 about was the first major clash with units of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade near Garn el-Garmusa (about 20 kilometres southwest of Derna). Combat is resolved soon in favor of the Germans and the advance continued without much history. In the late afternoon of the 3<sup>rd</sup> was reached and surpassed Derna, already cleared by the enemy; in the evening the two groupings is arrested at Tmimi.

Rommel had reasons to be pleased. Since the beginning of the counteroffensive losses inflicted to the opponent amounted to 377 tanks, 192 artillery pieces, 1,220 trucks, 50 planes and

3,300 prisoners<sup>(44)</sup>, all cheaply. By interceptions, then, was that Ritchie was organizing a defensive position in the triangle Tobruk-Ain el Gazala – Bir Hakeim and British units were reported everywhere in retreat.

On the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Bastico had departed by plane from Misurata to travel to Benghazi with the directives of the Comando Supremo. Forced to a landing near the Arco dei Fileni, arrived at the command of the army the next day. However, Rommel was at Martuba, the Marcks grouping to head personally the reconquest of Derna, and had left said of not being able to establish the day of his return. Very disappointed and given the absence of license from the G.S., Gen. Gause, Bastico adapted to hear the Leut. Col. Westphal, declared who aware of the intentions of his commander and authorized to represent him. The Bureau Chief of operations therefore *Panzerarmee* premise of Mussolini's directives by von Rintelen and explained that in relation to the permission granted by them – occupation of Benghazi and forward transfer of two infantry divisions-the German command had been forced to ask the total availability of infantry divisions.

As for the device to be adopted, there were two solutions. The minimum is translated in a defensive position at Maraua, with a Division in Benghazi and the remaining in Ajdabiya, while the DAK and the CAM would be concentrated between Benghazi and Ajdabiya. The best solution was to bring the infantry divisions alignment Ain el Gazala-Segnali – North - Segnali South-Bir Tengeder and move to the back of the armored Corps right wing.

Bastico flew on the question of authorization of the Comando Supremo -were evident both direct contacts with Rome, possibly determined by the presence of Goering, both the usual excess of Rommel's initiative-and just consider the situation. Undeniably, this was much more favorable than it had hoped, and offered the opportunity to achieve a more fitting aviation deployment conditions. He also found the possibility of rapid reuse of the port of Benghazi, though initially to a limited extent. And, finally, on psychological and security plan, you couldn't leave exposed to possible Western Cyrenaica stakes and the national population at the mercy of the Arabs<sup>(45)</sup>. As a result, while accomplishing on one or the other alternative, authorized the movement of the *Pavia* to Benghazi and *Trento* and *Sabratha* between Benghazi and Ajdabiya, so that the CAM was used where

and as Rommel wanted. The X Corps, with *Brescia* and *Bologna*, it was instead, at least for the time being, remain on the positions of el Agheila. Of course the pace of operations would be subject to methodical services adjustment to the new positions.

The next day, February 4, Bastico reported to Comando Supremo for decisions. Meanwhile, Marcks and Geissler reached Gasr el-Amhar, West of Gazala, the 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn touched el-Mechili (sketch No. 11) and a unit of German paratroopers led by land at Gialo, occupied the OASIS. At this point Rommel decided to stop. If the opponent had suddenly counterattacked, the two groupings could fold up to the D'annunzio-Maraua alignment. On 5 February sent out orders for a temporary deployment very deep. On a strong line from el Tmini-Mechili, the pins were formed by Marcks grouping in the first place and an Italian Regiment in the second. On the intermediate line, d'Annunzio-Maraua, the defence was entrusted to the 90th Light. On a back line, the XXI Corps was to dislodge the *Pavia* from Benghazi to Sceleidima, from Sceleidima for the *Sabratha* to Antelat and the *Trento* from Saunnu to Giof el-Matar. The CAM, South of Benghazi, and DAK, around Barce, representing the mass of maneuver. The X Corps remained on the positions of el Agheila, but had to gather the *Balbia* with the *Brescia* East of el Agheila and *Bologna* West of Marsa el-Brega, leaving garrisons in key locations: a reinforced battalion at Maaten Giofer, another in Marsa el-Brega, a Saharan company at Marada and 9th battalion Border Guard to Gialo.

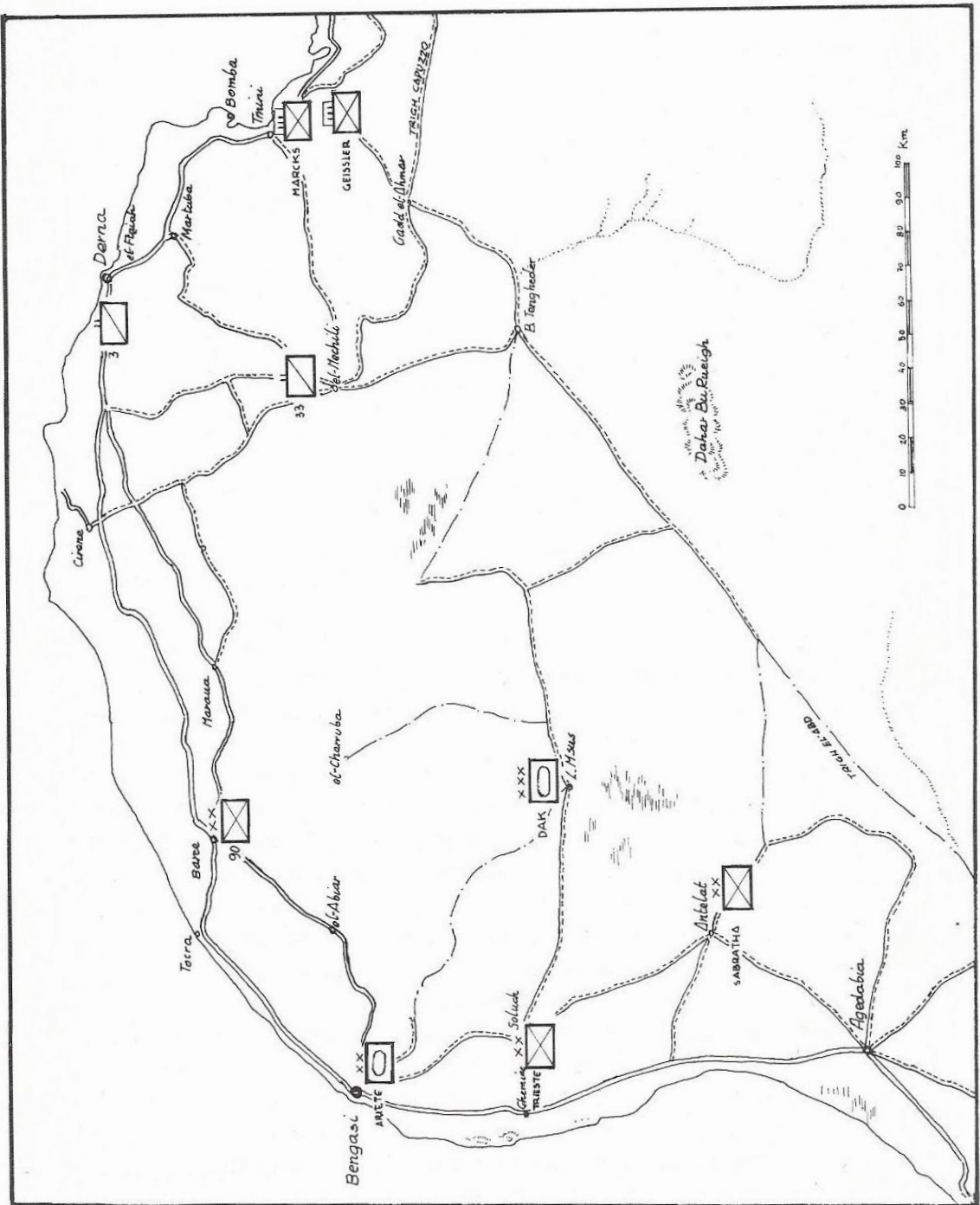
Of course Rommel wrote to von Rintelen and, equally naturally, begged him to advocate at the Comando Supremo the conviction to move infantry divisions on aligning the Gulf of Bomba-Bir Tengeder. The communication will, moreover, met with the response to Cavallero to Bastico, easily predictable response, knowing the views of the Chief of the General staff, but also influenced by a personal stance. The February 5 Cavallero had received von Rintelen, expressing his disappointment at the fact that Rommel had “taken” to the meeting with Bastico and specifying, by Mussolini, who “*so you can't go forward.*” Then he was informed that the operational choice had fallen on the minimum solution and concluded “*by proposing to wait another few days events, however the divisions of X Corps did not budge for any reason*”<sup>(46)</sup>. Evidently felt the air of opposition, because the next day he sent back to Libya with Leut. Col. Montezemolo to explain, where necessary, and especially support (?) thought



The situation of the *Panzerarmee* in the evening of February 4

LA SITUAZIONE DELLA PANZERARMEE LA SERA  
DEL 4 FEBBRAIO

Schizzo n. 11



from the Comando Supremo. At the same time sent to the Comando Superiore the official response:

- “1. Duce approves minimum solution leaving of course at commands responsible for having the best employees, keeping forces but as East said at number 3;
2. Duce believes that maximum solution may be considered only when the divisions will be formed and equipped with motion media & when the port of Benghazi will be put back in efficiency;
3. Duce reserves determine when moving X Corps forward may be authorized, in connection with what has been said at the previous issue;
4. Meanwhile, X Corps wait its reorganization and strengthening resistance position. On this position you move workers & available resources”<sup>(47)</sup>.

Since the first contacts Montezemolo realized that the Comando Superiore was conducive to maximum solution. Invited by Rommel to reach it, he went in flight to Benghazi, in conjunction with Gambarà and Marchesi, who wanted to take this opportunity for personal contact with the Commander of the *Panzerarmee*.

Rommel briefly explained the situation. Believed that the opponent did not have any chance to begin a consistent offensive at least for two or three months; Moreover, it could very well dare to raid with mechanized elements because they had noticed that he was prosecuted with minimum forces and, at present, far from great. With some exaggeration, claimed that such episodes, in the circumstances, they also could force him to abandon the Western Cirenaica, which, given the political resonance of recent military reconquest, was now unacceptable. Since, therefore, protect the region, warning set had the defensive organization in the following manner: the X Corps, deployed on the Gulf of Bomba-Bir Tengeder; the two armored bodies on the back, such as maneuvering mass; the 90<sup>th</sup> Light at Maraua, in the second line and the *gebel* garrison; the *Pavia* in Benghazi, to organize as a stronghold; the *Sabratha* and *Trento* in front of Ajdabiya for security of this area and of the via Balbia.

The use of the X Corps, which at el Agheila was completely unused, stemmed from the danger of leaving a contact with the enemy armored forces alone. Seizing an opportunity, Rommel held to highlight believe "*very strange that a commander could not have Corps of troops that were placed under his orders*" and openly claimed to be able to get more success, but not in the conditions under which he was placed, conditions that, continuing, they would instead need to decline the post of "*Commander of the forces involved*."

Ultimately, planned to ask the Comando Supremo the full availability of the X Corps, both through the Comando Superiore either through von Rintelen.

Montezemolo had immediately noticed that his mission was more difficult than expected because Gambara, intervening during the exposure and at the end of it, had shown definitely agree with Rommel against the thesis of Cavallero, making it harder to Montezemolo against two opponents. And while the early objections formulated had replicated Rommel, later was the same Gambara to respond. So, when Montezemolo requested the opportunity to maintain contact with the enemy by means of a deep and elastic deployment of mobile troops, while lagging behind the infantry to give, where appropriate, battle with these far from British bases, Rommel had retorted that he could not keep in touch with armored elements, too valuable to leave daily exposed to enemy cannon. The argument always of Montezemolo, of the danger which the infantry course would, if carried out without means of transportation, Rommel had responded that during the previous withdrawal, despite very difficult conditions, had not lost any Infantry Division. The request for data on logistics opportunities to serve a party much farther from the port of Tripoli, had replicated Gambara that *“logistics must be adapted to serve the needs and tactics that will be way to solve logistical problems”*, ensuring that the fuel would not be missed. Then he ended the interview, Montezemolo (Rome) deciding to return as soon as possible to represent the unanimous opinion of Comando Superiore and *Panzerarmee*<sup>(48)</sup>.

Back at Misurata, Montezemolo took the argument and suggested an intermediate solution: the XXI Corps with two divisions at Gazala and West of Ajdabiya; the X Corps at el Agheila. Indeed, one such solution was much more to be seen in terms of the arrangement that the tactic, however, it was accepted by Bastico and Gambara. Montezemolo was therefore commissioned to expose it to Rome on their behalf too, which he did, admitting, however, that *“even this solution presents serious drawbacks”*<sup>(49)</sup>.

Rommel could rightly complain that others came to interfere with the use of the units entrusted to him, however was not the type to get discouraged. While in a meeting, the X Corps gave beginning to the execution of his order to abandon the defensive position (apart from the garrison of the locality) and gather the via Balbia. In the telegram, just informed, Cavallero sent immediately

to Bastico: “*Duce order confirmation that the Tenth Corp should not make any move from resistance on which position should remain. Von Rintelen warned Rommel directly. Informed Montezemolo*”<sup>(50)</sup>, interrupted the movement.

Though the Supreme Command wanted to eliminate any chance of misinterpretation of its intent and on February 11 broadcast a new explicit provisions Bastico. First, he reiterated the concept of previous directives informant: “*ensure at any time and in any situation the defense of Tripolitania*”; then he defined the aims of the occupation of Cyrenaica: ensure the availability of port of Benghazi and major airports, allow the reaction against new British offensives maneuvered and facilitate the preparation for the subsequent advance on Tobruk. This place, by February 14, the X Corps was employed by the Comando Superiore, which was to manage the efficiency (essentially under the aspect of motorization), without abandoning the resistance position at el Agheila.

Finally, a recommendation: the expansion of the occupation of Cyrenaica and the freedom of action granted to *Panzerarmee* depended on logistical conditions that the Comando Superiore was able to provide<sup>(51)</sup>.

Bastico took note of directives and forwarded to Rommel, who made no comments. Just say that toward the middle of the month would be referred to the Comando Supremo in Rome and to Hitler's Headquarters on the situation. On that occasion would ask a few weeks for health reasons. The 14<sup>th</sup> sent out an order to the army for further conduct of operations, set the spirit of the directives of Cavallero, and 15<sup>th</sup> departed by plane for Rome. The following day also Bastico went to Rome for about ten days.

Meanwhile the movements already willing were underway. The only variant was the Mechanized Corps. At 18:00 of 6 February the 9<sup>th</sup> bersaglieri, with I/21<sup>st</sup> artillery and a company of the XXXII sappers battalion, had reached Mechili, encountering enemy scouting elements. The isolation of the column and the conditions under which it would have been if he had pushed, as ordered, a unit until Bir Tengeder, had however requested Gen. Zingales to ask Rommel that the whole of the *Trieste* or at least a grouping of the *Ariete* to move to Mechili. Rommel initially saw fit not to agree, but the aggressive attitude of British mechanized elements both at Mechili, where the intervention of the II/21<sup>st</sup> artillery was sufficient

to foil the attempt, both at Temrad, where a German recon detachment was forced to withdraw with sensitive losses, caused him to change his mind, much more than the information service gave on how likely an episode in its forces against Mechili. As a result, the evening of 8 February the CAM received order to leave a battalion of the Trieste as garrison of Sceleidima, waiting for replacement by the *Sabratha*, and moving in full to Mechili, while the DAK was to head towards the Martuba -Tmimi area.

By February 12 all the movements of the army divisions were completed (sketch No. 12), under the curtain of intense reconnaissance activities. It was, in fact, intend to Rommel to arouse the impression of an upcoming resumption of the Army offensive, which the opponent, causing the concern to strengthen their positions, would give him time to organize properly to defend.

If the units had suffered an inevitable wear, do not believe it was necessary a reorganization of that faced at the end of the retreat to el Agheila. On the contrary, there were excellent underlying conditions: very high morale, spirit of initiative, enhance booty. Suffice it to say that the only the CAM, started from Marsa el-Brega with about 700 trucks, arrived at Mechili with 1,300 vehicles, plentiful food and fuel reserves for a thousand kilometers.

With the laying of mines on the whole front, from the sea to Mechili, completed on February 16, began a long period of stasis that would have continued operating until the end of May.

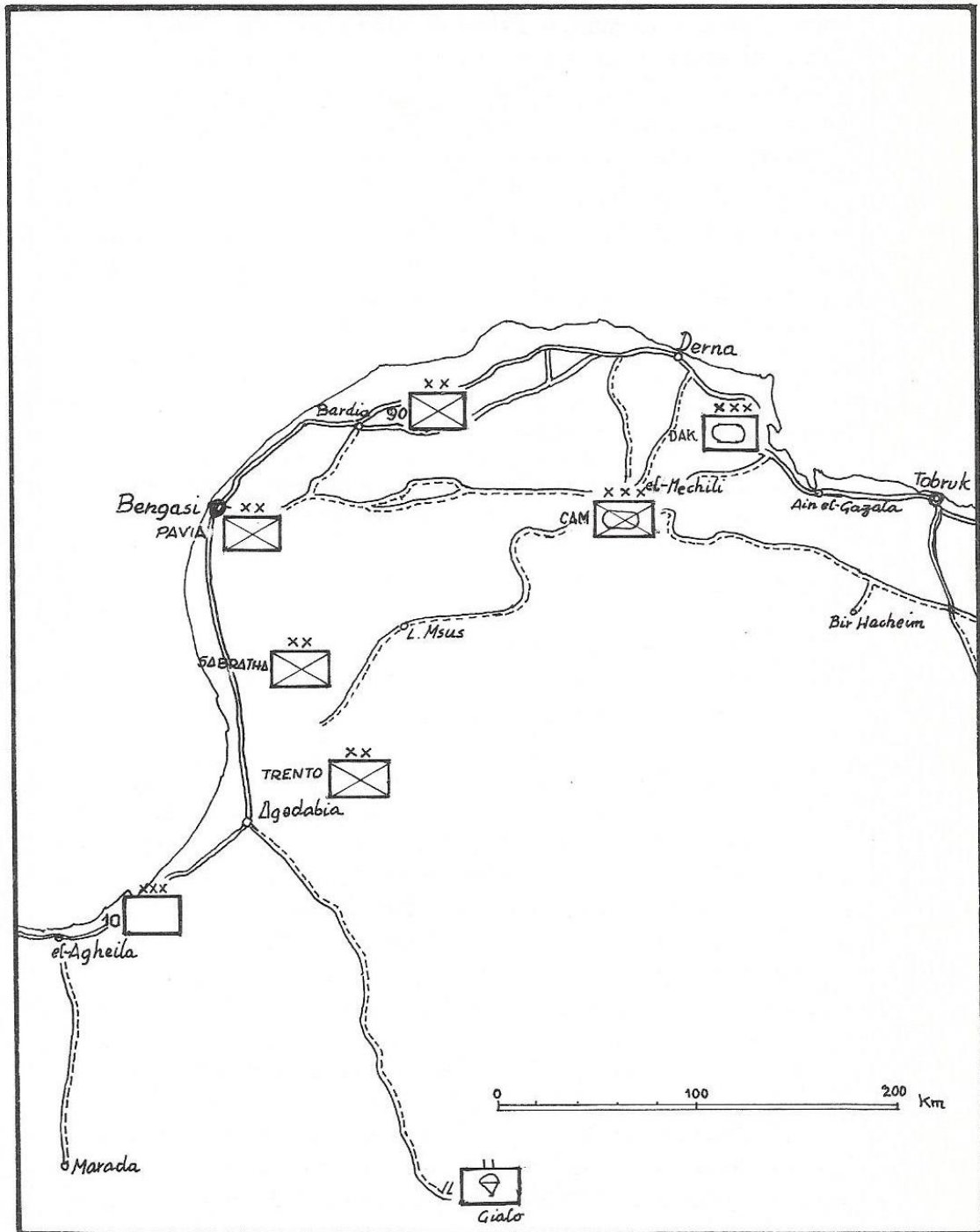
For the British part, the idea of a reaction was the last thing you could think of at that moment. As we know, Ritchie had resolved to retreat with the aim to give the least ground possible, even as convinced that Rommel would launch on the *gebel* few light forces. However, on the morning of 30 January, Gen. Messervy reported that he could deal with 1st Armored Division, with hopes of success at most twenty-five *Panzer* and Gen. Tucker, operating on the *gebel* was that in his opinion the enemy stopped on the plateau would have presented more dangers than advantages. Although reluctantly, Ritchie had to surrender to the proposals of Godwin-Austen and accept the withdrawal to Gazala.

The critical condition of the 1st Armored Division, a card in the British game, were subject to careful examination by Auchinleck. On 29 January he wrote to Churchill hinting at some hope that the Division was not entirely on the ground

The German-Italian situation on the evening of 12 February

LA SITUAZIONE ITALO-TEDESCA LA SERA  
DEL 12 FEBBRAIO

Schizzo n. 12



and denying that, in General, the picture seemed grim: *"you cannot talk about disorganization-had commented-neither confusing nor discouragement, however at least I have seen"*<sup>(52)</sup>. Two days later, however, the tone changed. First of all, dwelt on the "rout" of the 1st Armored Division. Regardless of his initial dispersion on an area too large, there were technical reasons, currently not corrected, such as the range and performance of the 2 pounder gun, and the insufficiency of the *cruisers*. Also the tactical use of tank units was not enough to outweigh the technical advantages of the German means, and also this problem you couldn't be solved in a short time. And added:

"I am reluctantly forced to conclude that, in addressing the German armored forces with any reasonable hope of decisive success, our armored forces, where conditions are presently equipped, organized and guided, must enjoy a numerical advantage at the very least in the ratio of two to one; and even if so must rely on the ability to act in close cooperation with infantry and artillery which, instead, except perhaps with regard to anti-tank pieces, are perfectly capable of competing with similar forces. They will try to apply these principles in a way tighter than permitted by the circumstances, I am afraid that there are signs that soldiers of the armored units are losing confidence in certain occasions in the means at their disposal. We will do everything possible to remedy this major drawback (...)"<sup>(53)</sup>.

Auchinleck returned to Cairo on 10 February very perplexed. For sure the crisis of supplies would have had to stop even Rommel, did not hesitate to consider even the possibility of having to continue the retreat at the border. However, the order that left Ritchie was defending Tobruk for use as the basis for a new offensive. The British withdrawal took place without incidents and ended on February 6 with the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Brigade at Gazala, the Polish Brigade immediately to the south, the French brigade at Alam Hamza and 150<sup>th</sup> English Brigade and the of the Guards Brigade at Bir Hakeim. The 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division controlled the interval between Alam Hamza and Bir Hakeim and the 4th Indian Division had to set up a position on the back, to give depth to the defensive system<sup>(54)</sup>.

But in the meantime, newly arrived in Cairo, Auchinleck was faced with a delicate problem: the replacement of 13<sup>th</sup> Corps Commander. On 2 February, when the situation was now clarified, Godwin-Austen had asked for exemption from Office, reasons for the request by the fact that Ritchie had shown little trust in him, and this was noticed by the staff of his command and the main subordinates.

Auchinleck, of course, was forced to accept the resignation. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corp was given to Gen. Gott.

The 4 February Auchinleck synthesized in a memo to the Defense Committee of the Middle East are his thoughts on recent events and decisions. Firm that he needed a numerical superiority of tanks of at least 50%, to resume and bring to fruition the Libyan campaign, he put on the table the following comparison figures likely mean between Axis tanks and British, excluding light tanks and infantry:

| Dates   | Axis           | Great Britain                                    |
|---|----------------|--|
|   | It. Ger. Total | 8 <sup>th</sup> A, 10 <sup>th</sup> A, res Total |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> February  | 185 42 227     | 226 8 - 232                                      |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> March   | 276 168 444    | 334 193  |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> April   | 276 272 548    | 496 252* 249                                     |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> May   | 276 272 548    | 570 283  |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> June  | 276 272 548    | 680 340  |
| * date of arrival not known and the 10th army reserves not included |                |  |

Limiting the reserve at 25% of the total, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had, presumably, on 1<sup>st</sup> April with approximately 620 tanks against 550 enemies and 1<sup>st</sup> May, about 770 against 550. So it was possible the resumption of operations maybe for early April, definitely for early May. A second problem was logistical support: If Benghazi was not fully available, it became impossible to feed in Ajdabiya more than one Division and a hundred tanks. This entailed not only the definition of Benghazi as a first goal, but also a quick effort and for establishing an efficient base.

Anyway, by the time it was necessary to establish a strong front, whose shelter we could put in place a set of forces that ensure at the earliest the resumption of operations. In that regard, he proposed to confirm the instructions already given to Ritchie: guarantee



a line west of Tobruk to defend the fort; keep Giarabub to protect the southern flank of the line; set up as a prudence line between Sollum and Magdalene<sup>(55)</sup>. This choice was fully shared by other commanders in Chief.

### 3. CONSIDERATIONS

The operations that brought the Italian-German troops from Marsa el-Brega to Tmimi-Mechili were considered by many historians - especially Germans-as the last act of the winter campaign; the first two being the battle of Marmarica and withdrawn from Tobruk to el Agheila. As a sequence of events without much interruption, it can also accept this point of view, even if the pendulum swing in favor of the English reached its peak in January and at the end of January began the next swing in favor of the Axis, meant to stop not at Gazala, but at el Alamein. However, it is undoubtedly the truth of a remark of Bayerlein:

“(…) The winter battle of Marmarica has special importance, because here were born and were fixed and tested tactical fundamental principles of desert warfare. All the accomplishments of the actions that followed are based on these experiences and lead finally to the culmination of the summer offensive, in which the desert tactics and Rommel's command were unlikely triumphs”<sup>(56)</sup>.

The comment was, rightly, very proud. The report was compiled following the events between November 18, 1941, beginning of operation *Crusader*, and the February 6, 1942, fulfillment of the re-conquest of Western Cyrenaica, command of *Panzerarmee* thus expressed:

“The British offensive in the autumn of 1941 is considered insolvent to destroy German-Italian forces in Africa, to occupy the whole of Libya and make contact with the French troops of General De Gaulle. The achieve these objectives would ensure possession of the whole North coast of Africa, to use as a base for further operations against southern Europe. The British offensive tended then to achieve military and political purpose quite far-reaching.

During an organizational activity lasting several months, British command had gathered all available forces in the Middle East in order to

ensure success. The large units already deployed in combat, and so knowledgeable of the Libyan desert, were reported to their organic levels, receiving substantial reinforcements of artillery also. Were congregating in zone three other infantry divisions and one armored Division, all with numerous cannon. At the start of the offensive the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had a superiority of forces against the Italian-German deployment that can be detected by the following percentages:

- combat tanks: 75%,
- scout wagons: 75%,
- small-caliber artillery: 180%,
- heavy artillery: 30%,
- infantry battalions: 30%.

The *Royal Air Force* had reached a level never until then found and its superiority can be so defined:

- fighters: approximately 200%,
- bombers: 50%,
- reconnaissance: 50%

The *Mediterranean Fleet*, with its numerous also the maximum tonnage unit, was ready in Alexandria to support ground forces operations. The ships ensured the safe transport of materials and troops along the Libyan-Egyptian coast and intervened in the fighting at Tobruk, Bardia and Halfaya without encountering any notable resistance.

The gathering of all the participating forces on the offensive in the autumn of 1941 was cleverly disguised (also under false pretenses with radio transmissions) and aided by weather conditions. The opponent was able in this way to guarantee the surprise. But the British Command, so clever and circumspect during the organizational phase, had a happy leg up in the conduct of operations. In contrast to the principle of gravitate with forces in the area chosen for the decisive effort, spent 18 and 19 November only part of larger units dependent on the 8th Army. This had as immediate consequence that individual complex of forces were defeated so hard as to be forced to withdraw from the area of fighting some of their now-free units of each operational efficiency.

During the battle of Libya the British command has never laid down provisions designed to focus efforts in a given moment and in any section of the front to achieve a decisive victory. And this error is surely one of the reasons that prevented the opposing offensive to achieve the ultimate success. In particular, he noted the following: the British Command has done everything possible to profit from experiences until then captured during battles in the desert. But he was also convinced to be less capable of the German command and tried to learn the methods. In practice, however, there is a lot that slowly conduct diverged and Systematic which had characterized the previous operational activities. The orders issued were based essentially on schemas and stated every detail of tactical Act. The big unit was thus practically denied any freedom of action. In the course of the fighting is not, therefore, the ability to adapt to each new situation.

The British soldier has won generally good, although he never equaled that German offensive spirit. The officers have shown

to be brave and ready to make sacrifices, but also rather reluctant to act of initiative. Of all the positive impression given by NCOs.

The numerically strong recon units and combative capacity increased by mobile artillery included, have done very well and with spirit of maneuver their tasks.

The attack was led by several, often numerous, entirely, causing a considerable loss of strength. The attackers were able to take advantage of a strong contribution by the artillery, which has sometimes supported the individual divisions with five or six regiments. It is likely that the enemy intended to compensate for the volume of fire with the inferiority of their tanks against those of the Germans. For the defense, the British have preferred incline positions, typically protected by deploying a sturdy recon tank, available in much higher numbers. Finally, mention the special characteristics of the *Long Range Desert Group*-a unit for staff and training has proved to be highly suitable to carry out recon missions and rear area disturbances-and *Commando* (...).

The conduct of *Panzerarmee* was inspired by the principle of employing forces, outnumbered, and possibly in offensive action in the most appropriate to ensure success. The implementation of this principle has been hampered by its aspects of coalition war [= contrasts with the Italians] and the logistics situation [= Italian command fault, responsible for the transports maritime e terrestrial], which has created some real crises. But despite these difficulties it is always felt that only an offensive attitude would balance the outnumbered and achieve success. For this reason, even during the period when you were forced to suffer the attack opponent, the defense was geared to high dynamics.

In applying this principle, the command has promised intend to especially to defeat, and possibly destroy your opponent. In this framework, the possession of positions or gain of land did not have any importance. The outcome of the battle was completely unconcerned that the enemy was in Marmarica and Cyrenaica. On the other hand, took a decisive value to have sufficient forces to launch them to counterattack at the moment. The reconquest of the territory previously left was only the inevitable consequence of the success of the offensive action (...) <sup>(57)</sup>.

Nothing against recognizing the substantial validity of these conclusions, even if exposure is too low the Strait under Germanic to be considered exhaustive. The command of *Panzergruppe* first and of *Panzerarmee* after despite being German, had employed the CAM and the XXI Corps and, subsequently, the X Corps. The ignore all Italian divisions is definitely not objective, but simply to end of January offensive, we must admit that the lion's share has been entrusted to the *Afrikakorps* and from this place very well, add, though-down maneuver coordination-had left to escape the brilliant opportunity to annihilate the English 1st Armored Division.

The similarities and differences between the Italian-German counter-offensive of 1941 and 1942 are easy to find. Both begin with the characteristic of the probe, in order to check the consistency of the opposing forces, shock and buy some space (to use the best locations in the first case, in order to have broader field for armored maneuver in the second). The boost to proceed boldly came from opponent: surprised and disoriented for speed and advanced decision, believed to be facing a full-fledged operation in force and overestimating the extent of Axis tanks, adapted more or less quickly to a retreat to avoid losing troops West of Cyrenaica. And basically I was able, for the first time the prisoners amounted to little more than 2,000 men, the second time at about 3,000, including 2,000 in the fighting took place in the area of Ajdabiya between 21 and 23 January. In 1941, Rommel arrived in Tobruk in nine days, in 1942 at Gazala in fifteen. In both cases he employed only mechanized troops: the 5<sup>th</sup> Light, the *Ariete* and motorized elements of the *Brescia* in 1941; the 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer, the *Ariete* and the *Trieste* in 1942.

The main difference lies in the type of maneuver, and this obviously influenced the level of British forces. Given that the unscrupulousness of the progression of Rommel was always, especially at the beginning, very calculated and operational developments that resulted in substance in an exploitation of success in the fighting of the early days, it should be pointed out a general situation of favor to share common, albeit for different reasons.

In late March 1941, Britain had moved all the attention on the Balkan events and the two victories on the destruction of the Italian 10<sup>th</sup> Army and the happy outcome of the battle of Matapan-off had to concentrate on military aid to Greece (operation *Lustre*). So on Gen. Neame, the Commander of British troops in Cyrenaica, was left with the 2nd Armored Division (devoid of an armored brigade), the Australian 9th Division and the 3rd Indian motor Brigade to carry out a task not all rest, but not prohibitive: defend *the desert flank* since that wasn't resolved the Balkan game. In 1942, the successful operation *Crusader* and entry into the United States did consider can continue advancing on Tripoli. On the absence of the *Mediterranean Fleet* this time was not determined by a heavy commitment, but diverging from a defeat: the incursion of special means of the R. Navy in Alexandria. However, the Libyan theater

It was enough to defend the “*desert front*” until the war machine had not moved ahead of that so much enough to sweep away the remnants of *Panzergruppe*. Therefore all 8<sup>th</sup> Army troops before Rommel was the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps of Godwin-Austen with 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division (less one armored brigade), the 200th Guards Brigade and the 4th Indian Division. The 1st Armored Division and the 22nd Armored Brigade had been withdrawn, one to return to Egypt and reorganize after the victorious Gallop from the border to Ajdabiya, the other to retreat to Tobruk and reorganize after the blow just south of Ajdabiya in late December.

The information provided at the controls of a sufficiently valid framework; What was missing or was uncertain was compensated by the extraordinary insight of Rommel. So, in 1941, reached Ajdabiya and having eliminated from the scene the British 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Brigade, he had no hesitation to wrap the entire *Jebel* focusing on el-Mechili and Gazala (sketch No. 13). In 1942, having failed to encircle the positions of Marsa el-Brega or wrap northeast of Ajdabiya the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division (or rather 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade), was limited to engage armored bodies in protecting the exposed flank, before the DAK to Wsus and the CAM and Marcks grouping pointed concentrically on Benghazi; then the CAM at Mechili as Marcks groupings and Geissler arrived at the Gulf of Bomba (sketch No. 14).

The two were virtually supercharged advanced “improvised” by Rommel, who led circulating, by plane or by car, wherever you direct your columns. From Ajdabiya in Benghazi we can say that every day appeared at almost all of the units of the DAK and CAM. After Benghazi concentrated attention on the progression of German groupings through the *gebel*. But-although objectively the post of a commander of the army you cannot discern at columns of head-unlike detected during his run to the border, at the beginning of *Crusader*, he was unavailable during the fighting: almost always a radio transmission system very efficient, even moving, kept him connected to the command of the army.

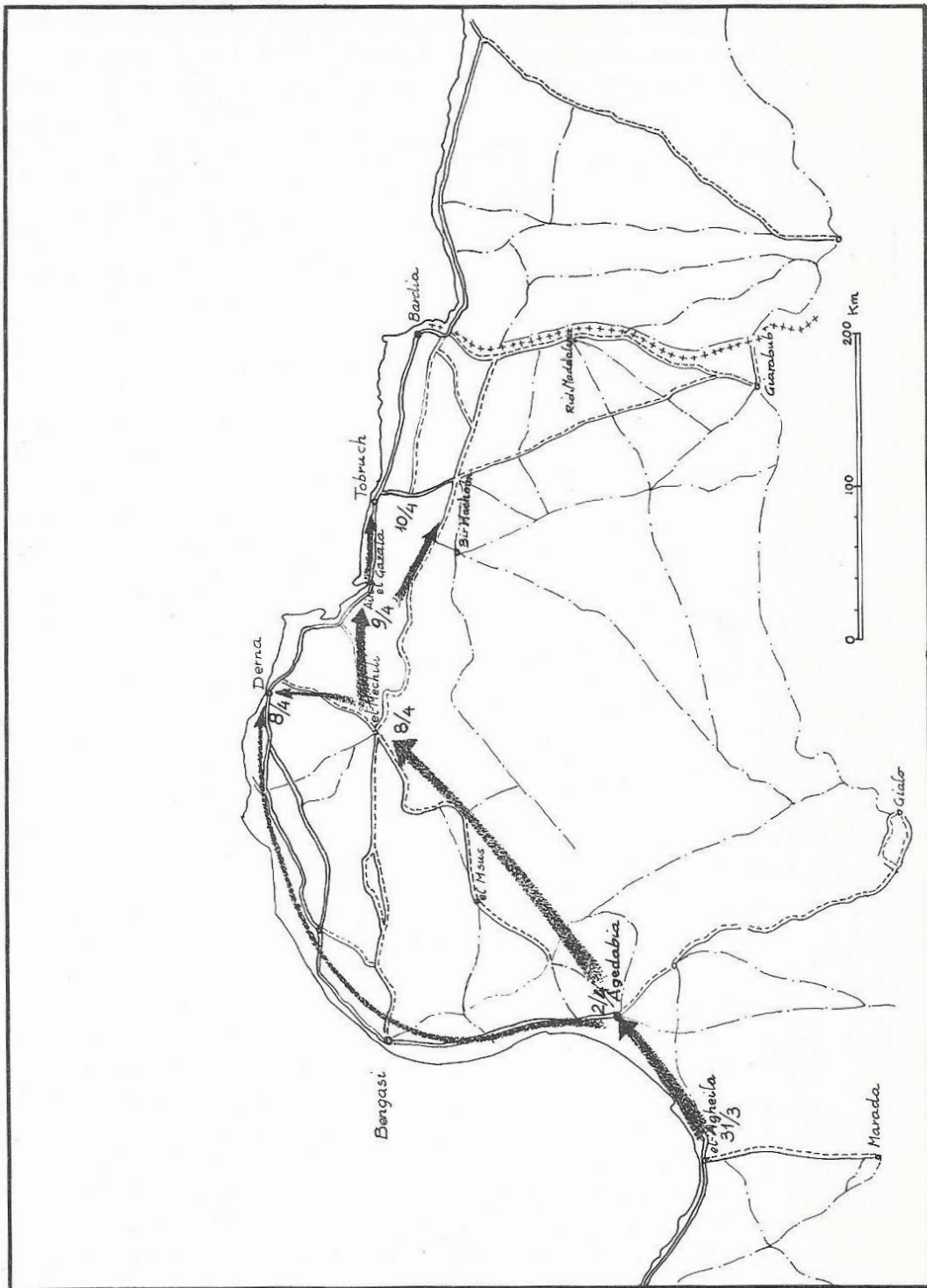
From the Italian side, stands out the same reticence of high-level Commands to advance “*to much*” and the same enthusiasm of the troops taking part in the counter-offensive. It seems you can indicate how the two salient features at the top and bottom.

According to British thinking reverse causes were the difficulty feeding many forces past Ajdabiya, replacement

The conquest of West Cyrenaica in 1941

LA RICONQUISTA DELLA CIRENAICA OCCIDENTALE  
NEL 1941

Schizzo n. 13



This map illustrates military movements in the Tobruk-Derna-Benghazi region. Key locations marked include Derna, Tobruk, Benghazi, Agodabia, el-Agheila, Marada, Gialo, Bir Hacheim, Bardia, and Rid Maddalena. Arrows indicate the direction and timing of movements, with dates such as 29/I, 25/I, 24/I, 21/I, 3/II, and 4/II. A scale bar at the bottom indicates distances of 0, 100, and 200 km.

experienced old armored units with other recent influx. On the motivation of logistical character you may agree, but only partly. In the end we have stocked three Italian Corps and one German for eight months between Tobruk and the frontier, surpassing difficulty far greater in terms of maritime and inland transport and availability of materials. The second plea is there any observation to make: as the 2nd Arm. Div. of 1941 and the 1st Arm. Div. in 1942 the difference was noticeable. Creagh's Division was notoriously inadequate training and was failing even means, why go for intervention in Greece; but the fate of the Division of Messervy was absolutely unpredictable to English eyes. Churchill said the 1st Armored Division was one of the best British unit formed mostly by people with more than two years of training, "*had reached a very high level of preparedness, which was not given to find in any of our regular unit*"; his vehicles were adapted to the needs of the specific natural environment already in Britain; It was landed in Egypt in November and, after a new control to the media, had crossed the desert with tanks mounted on trucks, and Antelat in perfect order. Yet without even having been engaged in a battle, had lost a hundred tanks.

Auchinleck also hinted at a technical inferiority to the *Panzer*, but Churchill expressed brutally posing in the foreground the conduct of combat:

"When you think of the cost, time and effort needed to create a unit as an Armored Division, with all his men and trained experts (...) It is really unfortunate to see what results they have obtained mean-spirited due to poor direction (...)”<sup>(58)</sup>.

\* \* \*

Of course, both the Comando Supremo and the Comando Superiore scurried to gather data and technical-tactical stemming from combat experiences of Italian, German armored units (a few updates) and British (war booty documents, including a report compiled by Gen. Norrie, Commander of 30 Corp).

Neglecting the L 3 tank, absolutely unsuitable for amour, speed and engine, the M 13 tank, although much better than the M 11 type, does not satisfy the hopes, nor could it. The entire engine was of insufficient power, which led to a series of very frequent



faults (even higher in newly arrived X Tank battalion of the 133<sup>rd</sup> Tank Regiment of the *Littorio* and transferred en bloc to the IX battalion of the *Ariete*); the failures of the diesel filter were normal during long transfers and in combat, resulting in the arrest of the tank in critical circumstances and, Furthermore, being the filter outside, the staff had to go outdoors to clean during the clash. Finally, autonomy appeared limited.

But above all was essential to the realization of a whole series of armored vehicles, which already included in German, British and American: a command tank for battalion commanders, Division and Regiment, with a radio station whose flow reached the hundred kilometers <sup>(59)</sup>; a crawler tractor with light armor or, better yet, a tank for recovery of inefficient vehicles on the battlefield; an armored vehicle carrying parts store of labor higher repair consumption for summary and urgent repairs; a workshop for armored battalion, able to follow the unit anywhere. The absence of such means by the Italian ranks do effortlessly imagine the difficulties faced by the *Ariete* in movement and in combat.

On the subject of anti-tank weapons, antitank rifle the *Solothurn* 20 and *Hotchiss* 25 (war booth) were clearly makeshift. The typical modern anti-tank piece was 47/32, whose performance appeared inadequate now. As the armament of the tanks, forced to carry the tank below 1,000 meters from the target to shoot, when the British 2-Pounder piece opened fire at 1,500 meters. As infantry weapons suffered three major flaws: the mechanical towing on varied terrain was impossible (even for the mod. 39 “truck portable”) and that at dismounted infantry's arms prohibitive; it lacked a protective shield for the crew and the horizontal field of fire was too restricted. The 88/55 gun, which was fine, as was not free from incidents in the field of employment was driven by Lancia 3 Ro, absolutely unsuitable to the trailer quickly on any ground.

Instead he was already providing good try new material from 75/18 self-propelled gun. At the beginning of the battle in Marmarica, in support to the unit carriages were used 100 /17 pieces for fixed installation on truck Launches 3 Ro, from 75/27 on tractor TL 40 and 65/17 on self-protected Morris of booth by Italian war (flying batteries); and batteries from 20 and 50 mm in half-tracks from German side.

The results had suffered in a case the limitations posed by means of transportation in the second case from the caliber of the firearm.

In the counteroffensive, were employed real self-propelled artillery: 75/18 pieces on tank M 40 hull (the DLI and the *Ariete* DLII Bns) and Soviet 76.2 pieces on the hull of the Mark IV (605<sup>th</sup> *Panzerjaeger* Bn). The effectiveness of self-propelled artillery manifested immediately evident to the relief of all, however, especially for Italian units, unlimited number of tanks in line and low power 47/32 gun led to use if driving more or less with the same criteria of the tanks, giving up utilization of major artillery arm (8-9 km).

For the campaign, the artillery pieces from 65/17, from 75/27 and of 77/28, which there was more willingness, were exceeded for deficiency of power, range and mobility. The pieces of 75/27 and 100/17 with *electron* had shown by not withstanding prolonged mechanical efficacy, therefore, towing in long transfers, had necessitated the trucking to avoid irreversible degradation. Only Corps artillery employed, the 105/28 mm gun had been subject to high speed range resulting in a very high percentage of incidents for brake parts. Good evidence, however, of 8<sup>th</sup> artillery of the Army: the guns of 149/28, 149/40 and 152/37 that, employed with a certain irrelevance, had unearthed a satisfactory mobility.

NOTE TO CHAPTER TWO

- 1) B. LIDDELL HART, op. cited, p. 180.
- 2) I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited, p. 142. "This was a courageous reading of the situation commented the official report--but not an accurate reading. If a package was shown, it was a British neck that the enemy was now threatening with powerful forces".
- 3) HANS-OTTO BEHRENDT, *Rommel kenntis vom Feind im Afrika Feldzug*, Rombech, Freiburg 1980, p. 164.
- 4) A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 115.
- 5) Cavallero Diary, date 23.1.1942.
- 6) Historical Diary the Corps of Maneuver, date 23.1.1942.
- 7) Communication from *Panzergruppe* to the XXI Corps, date 23.1.1942, at 01:45.
- 8) The message, sent on the 23<sup>rd</sup> at 08:45, was received by the XXI Corps at 12:40 and, shortly after, retransmitted to X Corp. Navarini ordered that the next morning, at dawn, a grouping of the *Pavia* and one of *Trento* reached by truck. They then made other trips, to Sadie. The last would have started the movement to foot on Balbia.
- 9) The 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars remaind with 8 *cruisers* and the 9<sup>th</sup> with 28. The Bays had insignificant losses.
- 10) Is the new rank attributed to *Panzergruppe*, that was already a small army, and the new title, *Oberbefehlshaber* (Supreme Commander), had been resolved by Hitler, who wanted more so bring out the German presence in Africa. The title could confer greater authority to Rommel, but only if explicitly linked to the Exchequer, which was not it could be. Therefore Rommel continued to be operationally under Bastico, Commander in N.A., and, in some respects, from Kesselring, Commander for the South. The command of the army had the names of *Panzerarmee Oberkommando* (PzAOK).
- 11) DSCS, tele 241821, date 25.1.1942, at 02:00.
- 12) A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 116.
- 13) The wording of the order issued by the *Panzerarmee* at 21:00 for two Italian Corps is significant: "*Pause at first [temporarily] movements towards Agedabia, except Division Sabratha. Report on radio currently occupied areas Followed by further order*" (historical diary of XXI Corps, date 24.1.1942). However, on the afternoon of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Bastico had held a meeting of Corps commanders and ordered the suspension of the transfer of the divisions as well as the return to previous positions as soon as possible.
- 14) B. LIDDELL HART, op. cited above, pp. 181-182.
- 15) ANTONIO TABRIZI, *Fiamme sul deserto*, 1st. Ed. Cisalpino, Varese 1962, pp. 57-61.
- 16) Diary Cavallero, date 10.1.1942.
- 17) CESARE AMÉ, *Guerra segreta in Italia*, Casini, Rome 1954, p. 96; CARLO DE RISIO, *Generali, servizi segreti e fascismo*, Mondadori, Milano 1976, p. 111 et seq. See also H.O. Behrendt, op. cited above, p. 176, that SIM would have succumbed to the Abwehr copy of the cipher, which is not true.
- 18) Chart, Comando Supremo racc. 140, cart. 2-Annex No. 1.
- 19) For example, see the 241821, date 25.1.1942 canvases, 02:00.
- 20) DSCS, tele 30077/Op. date 21.1.1942.
- 21) W. CHURCHILL, Op. cited above, p. 49.
- 22) F.W. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 104.
- 23) On 25 January, the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division had lost about 215 tanks and armored cars, 130 artillery pieces of various kinds and many hundreds of vehicles (B. LIDDELL HART, op. cited, p. 181).
- 24) C. BARNETT, op. cited above, p. 194.
- 25) DSCS, tele 30095/Op. 25.1.1942 date, at 14.15. refer to *interception notes* cited Feller. The Gen. Amé was the head of the SIM

- 26) DSCS, tele 30094/Op. date 25.1.1942, at 14:15.
  - 27) DSCS, tele SM/546 date 25.1.1942, 20:00 hours.
  - 28) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, part IV, Vol. I, p. 50. Churchill's message was originated from a communication made by naval liaison officer commanding-in-Chief of the Royal Navy in the Middle East, ended up in a copy to the Admiralty in London.
- According to Churchill the visit to Auchinleck in command of the 8th Army was caused by the quoted message, but the assertion does not respond to the reality. The Premier's dispatch was sent from London to the 25 January at 23:34 arrived in Cairo at the 26<sup>th</sup> at 01:40 O. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 439). Auchinleck arrived at Tmimi in the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup>.
- 29) minutes of meeting Annex 2.
  - 30) it should be noted that this thought of Rommel was not missed, as assumptions, to the British.
- In a dispatch to Auchinleck, sent the 28 January, Churchill wrote: "*of course you may have seen the report about the alleged intentions of Rommel, i.e. roundup of Benghazi-triangle Msus- Mechili and then retreat on line waiting around Ajdabiya*" (W. CHURCHILL, op. cited, p. 53).
- 31) Diary Cavallero, date 27.1.1942.
  - 32) DSCS, tele 30101/Op. date 27.1.1942, at 15:30.
  - 33) Even do it on purpose the telegram with the permission from Cavallero to occupy Benghazi came to Rommel in the afternoon of the 29<sup>th</sup>, in Benghazi itself. And imagine how sarcasm has been welcomed by the German side.
  - 34) I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 149.
  - 35) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, pp. 52-53.
  - 36) Ibid. The day before Churchill was presented to the room by providing members a brief account of operation *Crusader* and to add: "*I can't say what is in the present time the situation on the Western front in Cyrenaica. We have a very daring and skillful opponent and, if I may say so above the slaughter of the war, a great General*" (W. CHURCHILL, op. cited, p. 92).
  - 37) The Brigadier General H.R. Briggs (later major general) should not be confused with Brig. Raymond Briggs, Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> armored brigade.
  - 38) J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 445.
  - 39) DSCS, f. 333/S date 29.1.1942 of the military attaché in Berlin.
  - 40) The Geissler KG was formed by 115<sup>th</sup> riflemen, a *Panzerjaeger* company, a pioneer company and a field battery.
  - 41) DSCSAS, tele 2391/Op. date 1.2.1942, at 01:09 (hour).
  - 42) E. VON RINTELEN, op. cited above, p. 152. Von Rintelen tells even that Goering, invited to breakfast at the home of Cavallero, showed up waving the host with the cry "Tobruk!». Which struck Ciano deeply, present.
  - 43) DSCS, tele 30128 /Op. date 1.2.1942.
  - 44) According to British losses between source between 21 January and 6 February amounted to 1390 men (dead, wounded and missing), 72 medium tanks 40 field guns (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited, p. 152).
  - 45) Settlers and the national population of the *Jebel*, manhandled and totally plundered by the Arabs, living in wretched conditions.
  - 46) Diary Cavallero, date 5.2.1942.
  - 47) DSCS, tele 30160/Op date. 6.2.1942, at 20:45.
  - 48) DSCSAS, f. 01/2826 Op 9.2.1942 from the Commander superior -annex 3. Rommel had expressed the desire that Montezemolo at the moment telegraphed to Rome and remained a few days with him to realize *de visu* defensive organization envisaged on the Gulf of Bomba-Bir Tengeder, but relented at the insistence of Gambara.
  - 49) DSCS, tele date 9.2.1942, 804, sent the 10.2.1942, 01, at ten hours By Col. Montezemolo.
  - 50) DSCS, tele 30166/Op. date 8.2.1942, 2100 hours.

- 51) DSCS, tele 30188/Op. date 11.3.1942, at 21:30.
- 52) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 54.
- 53) Ibid, pp. 54-55.
- 54) According to the Italian and German information services, the line of Gazala was required by a security bracket (4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> South African armored car Regiment), while the defensive position was slightly behind found here-Bir Hakeim, the highlands, to the Sea southward, from the Indian 4th Division, South Division, 150<sup>th</sup> British Brigade 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division. On the reverse, the French light Division and the 200th guards Brigade. At Tobruk were given the 70th British Division and the 32nd tank Brigade. At the border, 30<sup>th</sup> Corps had the South African 2nd Division, the 1<sup>st</sup> tank Brigade and 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored brigade.
- 55) C. AUCHINLECK, Despatch quoted, Appendix 8.
- 56) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 112
- 57) H. O. BEHRENDT, op. cited above, pp. 170-173.
- 58) W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 57.
- 59) The RF radio stations 2/3, in car trunk, for Controlling tank Regiment were devoid of any usefulness: limited capacity, only link in telegraphy and operational needs on the ground

## CHAPTER THREE THE SPRING OPERATIONAL PAUSE

### 1. THE ITALIAN - GERMANS OPERATIONAL GUIDELINES

In 1942 had opened for Italy under very bright prospects. About a thousand establishments controlled by the Fabbriguerra\*, a good 729 had to stop the work in whole or in part. In February, Gen. Favagrossa had repeatedly indicated that the availability of raw materials for the current year-believed to be a few months before approaching that of 1941-was definitely less due to the increasing lack of electricity and coal as well as deficiency as a result of the reduction of supplies from Germany (regardless of significant backward gradients accumulated by the Third Reich, 1941).

When, then, Gen. Favagrossa learns indirectly of the plan to send new forces to Russia transform the Expeditionary Corps in an army, it became alarmed. Its attempts at deterrence, Cavallero *“I said no worries I had to have for supplies since Abbas out of arms and ammunition, all would have provided the Germans (...). Ensured that occupied the territories assigned to the army, this would have collected many materials abandoned by the Russians and also useful to increase raw material supplies for the armed forces stationed in other theatres of operations (...)”*<sup>(1)</sup>.

Then Gen. Favagrossa prepared a note for Mussolini. It had calculated, so to limit the designation particularly significant raw materials, which in the iron industry, whose production in January and February had dropped to zero, the deficit amounted to 130,000 tons and that of the month of February had experienced a contraction of about 20,000 tons, equal to 25% of the total. The relatively favorable situation in December 1941 had enabled it to overcome the winter without serious consequences, but it was essential to a 15% reduction to the normal odds assigned to various ministries in the corresponding months of the previous year, without any possibility of extra-quota increases. And always new surprises in coal supply are not compelled to even more contractions.

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\*From context the resource rationing board, and board for war production

“On the subject-he concluded-I would insist on draw your personal attention in order to avoid partly justifiable trends, formulate programs often excessive, and therefore impractical. *For the Armed Forces, even more than for other departments is indispensable, given the lack of escorts in means of offense and defense, to deal with planned operations with certainty to food, whatever additions, the battle.* No greater chance is permitted and therefore every optimistic appreciation on my availability could have tragic consequences. I repeat that I am not to be excluded, as I already mentioned, any further reduction”<sup>(2)</sup>.

Mussolini read the memorandum in the presence of his compiler, which ultimately claimed an inability to send an army to Russia. “*You are right!*” replied the Duce<sup>(3)</sup>. And the army departed. And, of course, was supplied from Italy throughout, except for meat, flour (in part), forage and fuel. And in our real operational theatre the difficulties were never overcome.

It is not hard to understand the position taken by Cavallero. Well realize how were things, though, evidently, he indulged in certain political aspects of war-who knew seen kindly by Mussolini and tended to mitigate negative aspects. Russia's campaign is a classic example of this. Not only, in those early months of 1942, Favagrossa outlined a very serious perspective, but the development of army building plan established in September 1941 was unsatisfactory.

The plan in question included, very optimistically, adding to existing then another 64 divisions 16 large units, so, come to the end of April, and with the well-known transformations, to a total of 80 divisions, namely:

- 9 infantry divisions,
- 12 motorized divisions type A.S.,
- 5 infantry divisions, truck portable
- 6 armored divisions,
- 2 rapid divisions,
- 6 alpine Division
- 1 parachute Division,
- 1 air portable, Division
- 8 occupation divisions.

More precisely, you had to be able to provide, within the time mentioned, the 100% completion of 33 existing divisions, to the establishment of 4 new divisions and 12 new divisions with organic and reduced resources. The remaining 31 divisions would remain.

incomplete. In parallel, and therefore outside of the program was scheduled feeding of operating theatres and the reinforcement of maritime borders (establishment of coastal divisions, Constitution and completely territorial and mobile territorial battalions, etc.).

Now you should see that the deadline it could be respected objectives. The main causes were to be found in the difficulties of production (lack of raw materials, electricity); large quantities of materials sinking; unsatisfactory quadruped requisition (only 17,000 instead of the expected 28,000); decrease in availability of trucks (just 4,000 instead of 7,000); unforeseen operational requirements (especially for the Expeditionary Corps to Russia) who had absorbed 1,740 trucks, 3,500 quadrupeds, etc.; development of operations in North Africa.

In essence, when there were only six divisions “complete or nearly”<sup>(4)</sup>, which could become 23 in June when they turned up the 1922 class recruits (second fortnight of May). No hope for the establishment of two other armored divisions, given the lack of tanks and the delay in the completion of the three existing divisions (*Ariete*, *Littorio* and *Centauro*) caused by the unexpected need to send monthly part to Libya « in bulk ».

A picture like this is, admittedly, depressing. You cannot examine the basis on which the program was launched, however appear evident errors of prediction and that set or excesses of unjustified optimism. Almost all causes of alteration in the regular conduct of quoted-and that “explained” the unpleasant situation in an internal memo of the Comando Supremo - were, after all, what could and should be appreciated in programming: material losses for sinking of steamships, the ordinary and extraordinary supply of personnel and resources, the difficulties in production. Other reasons leave perplexed: 17,000 quadrupeds requirements instead of 28,000, 4,000 trucks instead of 7,000. One, finally, is unacceptable: the acquiescence to the political decision to send an expeditionary force to Russia. It was mentality. A note of Ciano, just in those days, is burning:

“The Duce is-as usual-restless with the military. To send to Russia in May, three divisions we must let the German give us anti-tank pieces, anti-aircraft artillery and trucks. Nevertheless, Cavallero presented Mussolini a table from which a result we produce 280 anti-tank pieces per month. Cornered, he confessed that this was not true in fact, but corresponded to our theoretical possibilities and, in pencil, before the same Duce, has corrected the 280 to 160”<sup>(5)</sup>.



However, the complete overview about the use and conditions of Italian divisions in mid-February 1942 it was as follows:

8 divisions in Libya: 1 Arm. Div., 1 Mot. Div., 5 Div. type A.S. 42, all in the course of reorganization and completion of personnel and means. In process of arrival a second Arm. Div.;

4 divisions in Montenegro: 2 Alpine Div. and 2 Inf. Div., partly incomplete;

12 divisions in Croatia: 1 Quick Div., 9 Inf. Div., 1 Alpine Div., 1 Occupation Div., partly incomplete;

6 divisions in Albania: 6 Inf. Div. partly incomplete;

8 divisions in Greece: 1 Alpine Div., 7 Inf. Div. partially incomplete. The Alpine Div. repatriation was underway for next deployment for Russia;

3 division in the Aegean: 3 Inf. Div. partly incomplete;

3 divisions in Russia: 2 Inf. Div. 1 quick Div, and in the course of reorganization and completion of personnel and means.

3 divisions in Sicily: 3 Inf. Div. partly incomplete;

3 divisions in Sardinia: 3 Inf. Div. partly incomplete;

6 divisions on the French border: 2 Alpine Div. and 3 Inf. Div. In the course of completion for sending in Russia and 1 Inf. Div. incomplete,;

21 divisions in the Peninsula: 2 Mot. Div. *complete* with expected Libya posting, 2 Inf. Div. and 1 Parachute Div. *complete*, 1 Arm. Div. and 1 Quick Div. incomplete, 4 Inf. Div. incomplete, 3 Truck transportable, and 7 Occupation Inf. Div. to be constituted.

Beyond these 77 divisions existing, -9 coastal divisions, of which 5 in Sicily, 2 Sardinia and 2 in the peninsula. The issue was taken into consideration in the first decade of March. Apart from deficiencies of varying type and size, the main topics were always the same: artillery, ammunition, armored vehicles and trucks. As Cavallero claimed bitterly, *“the integral solution of the problems is planned for the years 1943 and 1944. We must, instead, fix so decided that current 1942 is one within which you must upgrade at most all the energies in order to achieve more concrete results”* <sup>(6)</sup>. Obviously the best intentions were not enough, especially for the first argument. After a long and depressing, review the allocation of large artillery unit was determined in these terms:

Rapid Div.: three groups of 75/32;

Alpine Div.: a group of 75/13 for each Alpine Regiment plus a group of 105/11 war booty;

Infantry Div.: two groups of 100/17 and two of 75/13 or 75/18-34 or 75/18-35 or 75/27;

Div. type A.S. 42: four groups divisional motorized and one Divisional anti-aircraft;  
Armored Div.: two groups of 75 T.M., two of 75/18 self-propelled, one from 105/28 or 105/32 and one of 90/53.

The Corps was established a grouping with two groups of 105/28, two from 149/13 or 149/19 and two of 75/32 or 75/18-35.

The crisis for the medium and heavy guns was sharpest. It had not been yet defined material for the replacement of 105/28 and was currently facing requirements by withdrawing the pieces already designed for coastal defense, which was the 105/27 or 105/29 of war booty. The 149/13-piece was supposed to gradually take over from the 149/19, which were committed 532 specimens. The new Corps, there were four groups of 149/40 (one for North Africa and three for Russia) and one from 210/22 (for Russia) and that's it: the production was virtually irrelevant and not allowed new units to enter service.

\* \* \*

In Libya the problem to be addressed, and with both hands, was that of general reorganization. It was not only to tidy up the well-known base divisions, but also try to resolve the issue of alternation, centralized training, logistical apparatus.

The restructuring of large units had already started. You couldn't hardly talk about adequate organic to the tasks: quite simply, the Comando Superiore had tried to give the best look for a tool that from the start knew of limited opportunity <sup>(7)</sup>. On the other hand, want to strengthen the Division with a recon battalion and one of tanks would be utopian. In essence, the new order appeared to have defensive capacity; and satisfactory good offensive skills; compensate with volume of fire the poor attitude to the movement in tactical field and at obstacles in a nutshell was the best we could do in those conditions.

It is natural that were also negative aspects, the main one being consisted in non-motorization infantry: without the aid of a upper level truck groups the Division was barely able to make small moves, whereas now it was known that in desert regions the troop walk was not used or intended

sterile sacrifice. Note that the organic Corps type contemplated only an A.S. 42 <sup>(8)</sup> mixed truck unit in place of the two truck groups of which he would need for the movements of the divisions.

According to the calculation made by the Comando Superiore needed:

1,000 trucks to cover the deficiencies of existing units.

1,400 to complete organic units;

800 to complete services of the Intendenza;

250 light tractors to the Divisional artillery.

A total of 3,450 trucks, where you had to add another of more or less equal quantity:

1,200 vehicles for the establishment of a truck group for each of X Corps and XXI,

so as to make possible the timely transport of the Divisions;

2,000 vehicles to complete the requirements for the resumption of operations pass

Tobruk and across the border.

Overall, therefore, the demands amounted to 6,650 vehicles. Sending monthly in Libya a thousand (of which 300 to cover consumption) the program requires about nine months; with 1,200 vehicles per month, time would be reduced to seven months. Note that the 6 March von Rintelen declared ready for dispatch in North Africa 10,630 vehicles intended for the *Panzerarmee*: 3,075 from expected units influx and which completed 7,555 for units already in place.

Within the framework of the reorganization included the problems of personnel and material. Needing officers, non-commissioned officers and ranks psychologically and physically fit to break (addressing) the strain of the war in the desert. It was not possible to hold in Africa for more than a year; but, while the Germans, convinced that this principle, maintaining regular replacements before you even touch the twelve months, many Italian soldiers reached the four years spent overseas. Also in this regard the Comando Superiore had sketched a program divided into a first stage to the completion of the divisions and a second phase for the Corps troops, as well as including a rotation plan. Around 55,000 men needed. Considering a transport of 10,000 men per month (including 2,500 to typical replacement), the fulfillment of the program involved seven months. From the German side, according to von Rintelen requests

on March 6, were ready for the *Panzerarmee* 10,800 men of new units and 8,000 complements.

Then there was the issue of quality. The serious deficiencies of various kinds found in management officers and non-commissioned, particularly recalled, lingering and the situation escalated to send additions from the motherland with a very poor training, although organic units (battalion, company). Suffice it to say that many drivers were not able to drive a vehicle with sufficient guarantees. Of course, as already done in 1941, there was established special schools including the School and graduate school of engineers in Tripoli and the tank crew School, which gave good results.

Also for foodstuffs and various materials had been made a calculation of need. Stocks of the Intendenza amounted on average to about fifteen days, that you had to take two months for operational needs and care (sea transport interruption). The 150,000 tons necessary for that purpose could be assembled in seven months, i.e. over a period of time equal to the amount deemed sufficient for personnel and vehicles. Of course had to keep in mind the needs of ordinary supply of 65,000 tons monthly, already amount to insufficient time, and to be considered apart from the transportation of motor vehicles, armored cars, tanks, artillery and materials calculated to number and weight.

The logistic organization had been cleared up as soon as the defensive position in Marsa el-Brega was able to stop British thrust. On January 11 the Intendenza of Tripolitania had assumed the name of Intendenza N.A., extending jurisdiction to all of Cyrenaica in Italian hands. Bearing in mind the operational situation was prepared an organization behind a static character in Tripoli, where the operation of individual services was regulated by the respective Deputy Directors of the Intendenza; an advanced mobile organization between en-Nofilia and el Agheila first in support of *Panzergruppe* and *Panzerarmee* then governed by a delegation of Intendenza; an complex of intermediate logistics centers, such as flying, along the axis of the supplies and vacate, at Sirte, Buerat, Misurata and Homs. The supply was from back to forward. The logistics centre of Sirte, the most advanced, provided to the restoration of stocks with which the delegation of Intendenza had fed on a daily basis at home big unit. Each of the other logistics centers supplied in front of the other, the passing troops and those in place.

On 28 February the organization was completed. Always at the purpose to shorten the life-path of a replenishment cycle,

the axis supplies and vacate was brought up to Berta; the logistics centers, located at a distance from one another, were a chain of successive rings. In addition had been made interim supply places, with the task of supplying the troops and provide assistance to truck convoys in transit, as well as possibly being able to turn easily into logistics centers, where the situation had requested. There were thus the logistics centers of:

Misurata at 211 km from Tripoli,  
Sirte at 252 km from Misurata  
El Agheila at 283 miles from Sirte,  
Benghazi at 286 km from el Agheila,  
Berta at 257 miles from Benghazi.

Sirte was the maneuvering element between the base of Tripoli and Benghazi; the latter formed the basis of supplies and vacate for all major units operating in Cyrenaica in North Ajdabiya, and the starting point of the organization services towards the East.

Petrol stations were located at:

Homs at 120 km from Tripoli and 91 to Misurata,  
Buerat at 166 km from Misurata and 87 from Sirte,  
en-Nofilia at 136 miles from Sirte and 146 from el Agheila,  
Ajdabiya at 126 km from el Agheila and from 160 Benghazi,  
Barce at 99 miles from Benghazi and 154 from Berta.

The system-one of the possible-stemmed from the limited availability of means of transport and the resulting need for a centralized use, but had a significant flaw: the supplies could be carried out in a satisfactory manner during periods of poor operational commitments or to duly planned actions, in other words when the need was provided. When, however, as you know, the pace of the fighting became chaotic and unpredictable battle developments, it is unlikely that the Organization could face service events. So the big unit commanders felt able to move with the necessary security, and this had become bitter experience.

The German organization had different characteristics. It stipulated that the divisions they obtained their supplies by own means to the warehouses of the army and could have followed, on wheels, equipment that allow overcoming temporary interruptions of supplies.

What is natural, this system rested on a large allocation of vehicles to drive.

However, the drawback of higher capacity was probably another. The conduct of operations was entrusted to the command of the *Panzerarmee*, logistics management (for the Italian units) to the Comando Superiore. As a result Rommel, one side could not get a precise idea of the logistical difficulties caused by the own design of maneuver, on the other hand had the full right to ignore and consider fixed by the Italian heavy problem of supplies. This topic was one of the first touched by Col. Mancinelli-new Chief of liaison with the *Panzerarmee*-with the Comando Superiore.

Having, in his first contacts with the Italian army's armored divisions, collected comments that underscored the uncertainty of logistical support in desert operations, requested the convenience to the delegation of the Intendenza under the Chief of staff of the army.

“Found-he wrote-a clear opposition. Obviously, it was feared that Rommel, always in trouble with the German services (or, to put it in other words: always oriented to commit his forces beyond the limits permitted by the capacity of services) could get their hands on a few things, especially on vehicles already so scarce, and fuel deposits, leaving Italian troops suffering, for the exclusive benefit of his units (...).

Ultimately reported the firm impression that this negative attitude was influenced mainly by concern to be deprived of an effective means to act on operational ambitions, possibly exorbitant, Rommel's tanks through the flow of services, in those cases where it proves ineffective the natural channel of command hierarchy (...)”<sup>(9)</sup>.

But it also gives the retaken Cyrenaica a robust spatial aspect. In this aim, on March 5 restored the Cyrenaican defense Command (Gen. Papini), to which were placed the fort of Benghazi, the «Ajdabiya sector» and « Barce sector ». Eastern jurisdiction boundaries coincided with those of the province of Benghazi (alignment Maraua-Bir Ben Gania). The area to the East of these limits was given command of the *Panzerarmee*. The Barce sector, comprising the territories of Barce, Derna and at Tocra, presented particular problems and devised the opportunity to confer an atypical features: was changed, therefore, almost immediately in the “politico-military Command of the Cyrenaican *Jebel*” to (Gen. Umberto Piatti dal Pozzo), responsible to bring back to normal the area and in charge of operations conducted against core Arab rioters in the *gebel*.

Ajdabiya sector extended its competence until Gialo and was entrusted to the *Bologna* Division (Gen. Gloria), from March 20 alone on defensive position at el Agheila and moved to directly under the Comando Superiore.

Further back was strengthened the «Sirtico sector » to enable the protection of facilities located in that section (the logistics centre of Sirte and the supply of Buerat and en-Nofilia) as well as of Tamet airfield, against incursions by mechanized patrols. In Tripolitania, finally, was established over the fort of Tripoli (Gen. Zarri), under the command of the defense of Tripoli (Gen. Armando).

The Tripolitania had distinctive features. The very fact that the Governor-general was in Cyrenaica, at that absorbed by the care required by operations, had caused some relaxation. *“Missing in Tripolitania a wrist restraint, able to continue to deepen even more the work carried out so far”* written on 5 may, the Chief of Cabinet of Governor in private to Bastico, and these take note in the margin: *“I realized it too”*. Regardless of the real efficiency of "fort" in Tripoli, which could not be affected by any effort to give priority to the Italian-German army in Cyrenaica, hits the hard judgment issued by Gen. Armando on staff:

“Morale of the troops. Quite high, as inaction, the unnerving service due to lack of power, the desire to return, etc. affect little favorably on morals.

Almost all of the officers-mostly recalled from leave, poorly trained and more prone to tranquil life, lacked fighting spirit and was resting in a comfortable position, with discordant period at that moment he crossed (...)”.

And if this was the fort of Tripoli and the Western sectors of Zuwara and Garian, not better was the situation in the Sirtico sector, which had always been to directly under the Comando Superiore. Not that in the spring of 1942 there were spread many troops (it had a Libyan battalion machine-gun battalion, two Libyan position companies, four batteries of small arms and four batteries of 20 mm), but

“Training and the latter's defense industry – continued Gen. Armando-gave the clearest demonstration of the absolute abandonment in which the sector itself had been left, before passing under Tripolitania defense.

All there gave the sensation of being in an area where the war takes place in astronomical distances: totally non-existent training;

defensive shooting and accommodations arranged with obsolete criteria by time; troop indiscipline; complete absence of officers in each field; comfortable standard of living for everyone, especially of management, from the lowest to the highest, office hours either allowable during peacetime (...)"  
 (10)

Neither the civil administration gave less to think. In spring flowed from Rome thirty officials to replace those returnees: "*all people without families, abandoned to itself, which quite rightly lamented the lack of even minimal Organization for their life.*" In particular, the situation of the civilian apparatus of Cyrenaica was a source of concern and was urging the need to clarify it by designating a responsible to assign specific tasks and defined in every sense: "*we are responsible for many millions-will add the head of Cabinet-and a complex organizational. And a very dangerous and you need to put things right.*"

Then there was the operating problem. As we know, not just issued instructions related to the directives of the Comando Supremo, Rommel and Bastico left for Rome, one after another. Cavallero had just studied and discussed the situation of February 16 when the R. Army received Bastico and examined with him "*the planned action on Tobruk and an offensive projected towards the Nile*". The first argument is translated in the development of the CAM, of X and XXI Corps, and, in particular, of medium and heavy gauge artillery. The second, however, was limited to a few general orientation without specifying points. You have to wonder what would have been said if he had known the availability of tanks under Auchinleck: 650 tanks at 1<sup>st</sup> April, 770 at 1<sup>st</sup> May, 1,020 in 1<sup>st</sup> June.

During the conversation came Rommel accompanied by von Rintelen, but the inevitable reference to operations in Libya was brief and generic.

The visit to Mussolini had been inconsistent and Westphalla recalled simply at the level of courtesy: "*Welcome to palazzo Venezia way was as always friendly and affectionate, but, nevertheless, not Washington conversations on military agreements. Mussolini looked good from taking certain decisions on the conduct of war.*" The thing is, moreover, explained. Mussolini expected to receive Bastico to examine first the operating problem separately. In fact, three days later Bastico had ample means of expose the situation. Enemy forces were numerically equivalent to those of the Axis, with a slight edge of tanks for the British. The divisions



Italy was reconstitution on six well-armed infantry battalions (26 47/32 pieces and 145 automatic weapons units for the Regiment), but had an uncommonly sensitive *deficit* in the field of motorization. On a complex of 100,000 men, there were 5,200 trucks (4,000 and 1,200 units of the Intendenza), while about 50,000 Germans, there were 14,000 vehicles.

Mussolini listened, then reiterated the importance of the positions of el Agheila (where a Division could be brought forward to mid-March) and the inability at the time, to continue; Moreover, affirmed the need to get soon able to regain the initiative, bearing in mind that, when that happened, it was decided concentrate on the Nile without stopping. Bastico not commented, but the 21<sup>st</sup> -taking a cue from Kesselring's opinion about the possibility of a British offensive move-up to a significant reminder: Cavallero from Mechili to Tmimi-Marsa Al burayqah-Marada ran approximately 650 kilometers. Obviously such a depth, if allowed to face enemy of stakes limited entity, did not allow of the opposing forces mass for an operation in a big way, so that, in similar circumstances, would have been inevitable neatly back the entire army to give battle at el Agheila. And it was necessary to also take account of the fact that Rommel at first unsuccessful, albeit to attack of a smaller extent, he would be induced to retreat at Comando Superiore responsibility.

This place, Bastico proposed to establish as soon as possible a defensive line at the height of the Gulf of Bomba with two divisions, so that the disengagement of the two motorized Corps per share to maneuver. To this purpose, instead of mid-March, a division of the X Corps would find a more useful use-along with other XXI -advanced position west of Gazala. But Cavallero did not agreed (the Commander of the *Panzerarmee*, he said, could resort to a division of the XXI Corps) and Bastico had not insisted, nor had Gambarà from Misurata.

He was disgraced. The tension of his relationship with Rommel, indeed almost disappeared in recent weeks thanks to the purposeful alignment of Gambarà, had added two more non-negligible weighted reasons. Had sent a copy of the report compiled by Ciano in December as Commander of the CAM and to refer to such political figures on military topics could not be welcome; Secondly he had openly taken Rommel's side party against the thesis of Comando Supremo, supported by Col. Montezemolo, giving-how Cavallero later disputed

- “to our ally a negative example of intelligence discipline, discipline, on the relations between high Command has the same importance for the fighter has the faithful execution of orders received. This episode of intellectual indiscipline is, in my opinion, of an exceptional gravity ”; and finally was involved in a matter that was taking disciplinary character surveys by the Ministry of war <sup>(11)</sup>. In conclusion, his recall to England, already decided the January 8 and held in abeyance because in those days Rommel had received the swords and the oak leaves to Knight's Cross and wanted to create an embarrassing comparison had a definitive confirmation, despite a last attempt of Bastico in his favor over 24 February before leaving. Thus, on 1 March, Gen. Barbasetti di Prun was succeeded in the post of Chief of staff of the Comando Superiore.

Back at Misurata, Bastico devoted himself to the work of reorganization and shortly thereafter also found ways to reach Cavallero with a sequel: Fougier, Kesselring and von Rintelen, Weichold. Arrived on 9 March and immediately made contact with leading Italian and German commanders. Apart from visits to the colonists of the *Jebel* and troops of some divisions, the topics to be considered were several. In Libya were, in round numbers, 128,000 men of the three armed forces and of the MVSN, whose national and 12,500 110,000 Libyans belonging to the R. Army. In Cyrenaica operated seven Italian divisions, to 39,000 men, and three German divisions, to 25,000. These 64,000 men were opposed by, according to the information service, 49,000 British:

|                           |             |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| in contact                | 2,000 men.  |
| on the Gazala             | 12,000 men. |
| on the Tobruk-Bir el Gobi | 21,000 men. |
| border                    | 14,000 men. |

The Axis forces was linked to maritime transport plan which, as we know, within six to seven months would complete the army. Cavallero exhibited the program prepared in Rome and, while underlining the inevitable condition imposed by the course of operations in the Mediterranean (Malta question), the respondent considered both hypotheses in a future still distant, of advance on Alexandria, and by an effort limited to Tobruk and, in the worst case, such a defense in place.

To spread common, it was necessary to achieve a strong and safe logistical support, which would have covered a primary function in food

the Army until the conquest of Tobruk. The Logistics Centre in Benghazi couldn't exceed certain size because it remains exposed to fluctuations of a battle. Cavallero therefore decided to focus on the logistics centre of el Agheila-covered position Marsa el Brega - Marada- the constitution of a large basis for the support of 150,000 men and 15,000 trucks. Its texture would amount to 45 days of stocks (105,000 tons) to be stored in 75 days (by 15 June) or 126 days (until 6 August), according to which the materials come from Benghazi (mostly) and from Tripoli or entirely from Tripoli. It was obvious the importance of stresses released full efficiency of the port of Benghazi to get soon a power of 1,000 tons. daily and, progressively, to 3,500 tons. per day. The specific task was entrusted to the National Medical Adviser of the vessel, which brought the best Italian technical, with ever so clever results.

One of the thorniest issues was that of repairs. Cavallero wanted to speak with local representatives of Fiat and Lancia, who were summoned by the Intendenza N.A., Col. Palma, on 13 March. The situation was the following:

damaged vehicles existence 1,000-1,300  
 monthly income 450-500  
 monthly repair workshops 400 military  
 monthly repair workshops 100 civilians

Evidently it was necessary to start with the dispose in any way over and avoid repeated in the near future. In other words, in addition to a reinforcement of the service car parks, it was necessary to increase the chances of civil organizations by flow from Italy, workforce, spare parts and materials.

Fiat had three permanent workshops (Tripoli, Misurata and Benghazi) and a mobile workshop (village Crispi) and operated 50 General overhauls per month. Could triple the yield. La Lancia had two fixed stations (Tripoli and Benghazi) with a capacity of 60 vehicles per month, but its production only. Could, at most, double the work.

Ultimately, he was able to reach approximately 270 large monthly overhauls, after two months from the date of arrival of the machinery.

He also brought much attention to the Libyan Sahara. The raids of patrols of the *Long Range Desert Group* had caused a serious

discomfort in the rear, but even more significant were the raids carried out by French forces of Col. Leclerc. In late February the actions acquired a rhythm disorder increasingly frequent and challenging; on 1 March were attacked principals of Gatum, Tegerhi, Tanessa, Umm el-Araneb, and overwhelmed, except the latter. In the following days also Tuilia and el-Chebir suffered a sudden attack. French patrols were advancing for many kilometers, avoiding combat and harnessing surprise. Their raids relied on mobility and were directed more to the capture and elimination of principals than the occupation of Felton. On balance, the results were limited, but the early success led him to be a most important destinations, such as Murzuk and airfields southern Italians. Cavallero, very sensitive to the psychological aspects of this activity, ordered to reoccupy the lost places and to endow permanent command of the Libyan Sahara (Col. Guido Pozzo) of other mobile elements, in order to promptly suppress the renewal of similar attempts, as well as to make the most of the aviation co-operation.

All in all the Chief of the General staff was pleased with the situation, but not with Gen. Zingales, who wanted to replace with Gen. Baldassarre, former Commander of the *Ariete*. In a certain weight measure some friction with the Comando Superiore and, it seems, with the Germans. At the time of his departure for Rome, Rommel had left the temporary command of the army to Gen. Crüwell, far less in rank to Zingales, causing the disappointment of these openly. Informed of the complaint, Cavallero rightly responded that, being the Commander of *Panzerarmee* entirely German, he saw as the Commander of the CAM could be at the head of it <sup>(12)</sup>.

Relations between the allies have always some misunderstanding or friction. He built a new controversy. Crüwell, informed that since 15 March he could count on the command of X Corps and the *Brescia*, had made known what deployment the army had to take. The 90<sup>th</sup> Light took to the sector to Tmimi, the *Brescia* to el-Mechili and *Pavia* would be placed between the two. On the rear, the DAK in the Cyrene and Apollonia area –XX Corps-name CAM took from March 10, after the breakup of the former XX Corp in Tripolitania-southwest of Berta, the *gebel*. Bastico knew this, had written to the Comando Supremo, complaining that the Italian divisions were located far from the via Balbia, in inhospitable areas for men and served only by bicycle

damaging to vehicles. Not only that, but in the overall picture of military activity, the Italian units were systematically reserved the most ungrateful and heavy tasks, while German had enjoyed long periods of rest and then had been called upon to carry out the tasks appear brighter. In support of this thesis, the events of 1941 and early 1942 were examined, one by one, until the last. The counter-offensive had brought CAM to Benghazi and the DAK to Msus; It would be logical therefore that the CAM, continuing the advance along the via Balbia, should reach Tmimi and DAK, continuing into the *gebelica* area, it leads to el-Mechili. Instead, the development of the advanced routes were crossed and brought the Italian units in the desert and German ones toward the coast. Best luck had the Italian artillery corps and Army Corps, stationed South of Berta. It was that

“The feeling that in the Division of responsibilities do not follow a policy of equanimity is felt by various commanders, by many officers and, if not confessed, certainly by units; and it is clear that, if this feeling becomes certain, it would exercise a depressing action on the spirit of the fighters.

Many felt the bitterness of having supported the most onerous in the fighting and the withdrawal and that they then participated in the technology that will be then a glory of German units (...)<sup>(13)</sup>.

Considering it inappropriate to treat the topic directly with Cruwell to create a dangerous atmosphere of coldness and distrust, Bastico had proposed to the Comando Supremo for the nod, as finding it, to his second step Rommel from Rome. It's hard to tell where resentment runs out the right facts and where to begin "*an unacknowledged intention of feeling mortified national pride, jealousy towards the ally that, with adequate resources, had been unable to achieve results to us precluded by the inadequacy of our poor strength*", to say it with the words used by Col. Mancinelli in describing the impression given in his first contacts with the Comando Superiore<sup>(14)</sup>. Cavallero, however, spoke loudly with Bastico during the visit of 9-15 March and dropped the thing. And did well.

Rommel returned the 19<sup>th</sup> and two days later asked for a meeting with the Comando Superiore, but a British initiative prevented him from going to Misurata: On the 21<sup>st</sup> the enemy attacked, operation *Fullsize*, designed by the Commanders in Chief to distract attention from the important convoy bound for Malta, which will be discussed later and that will give rise to the second battle of Sirte. Therefore, during

the night of the 21<sup>st</sup>, a *Long Range Desert Group* patrol launched deep incursions against the airfields of Barce, Benghazi, Benina and (where they destroyed three aircraft and three damaged), and the next morning 13<sup>th</sup> Corp gave way to a series of raids on different sections of the Italian-German front. Columns of the 1st South African Division and British 50th moved against the sector held by the 90<sup>th</sup> Light at the Tmimi fields respectively and Martuba. The South Africans were immediately arrested, but the British brought some success, managing to occupy the German stronghold of Gabr el-Aleima and capturing 150 prisoners. However shortly after they were forced to desist from effort, about twenty kilometers from Martuba. Further South, another column of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division, essentially to cover the exposed flank of the earlier engraved on the left wing of *Pavia*, without getting any results. The 22<sup>nd</sup> units of the *Afrikakorps* and *Ariete*, supported by aviation, restored the situation, but the British remained under the impression that the German-Italian forces deployed on the advanced positions might be insufficient to repel at any big effort.

Unable to move, Rommel sent to the Comando Superiore Col. Mancinelli for report on strengthening to implement: the XXI Corps on the left, touching the sea; the 90<sup>th</sup> Light at Bir Halegh el Eleba, the joint-between the XXI and the X Corps, which would remain in the area of el-Mechili. The above reported, Mancinelli was originated in directives that Rommel had received from Mussolini declared the March 18, during a short break in the capital.

Bastico asked explanations to Rome immediately and was told that Rommel and von Rintelen on March 18 were presented by Cavallero, who had reflected on the idea initially aired from Rommel at Tobruk, once taken, continue on the momentum across borders, and affirmed the need to stop at the edge of Sollum. Rommel had agreed, especially because a tough battle with British armored forces appeared inevitable and probability also for the lack of interest shown by the OKW to the African theatre of operations.

The new Colonel General was very disappointed by his visit to the Führer's Headquarters. Meeting with Westphal in Rastenburg on 17 February, had been admitted before Hitler believed to find these interest and enthusiasm for the new Libyan campaign. Hitler was certainly very delighted at the way with which the *Panzerarmee* had passed a hard time. I had spoken with heat twelve

days before with Gen. Nehring, the African front, expressing the desire for a advanced as much as possible towards the East and that pinning the most British forces. However the concerns arising from the situation in Russia had again taken the upper hand, and he listened with considerable indifference. Rommel made sure that with six motorized divisions would sweep away the English from Africa, but Hitler refused the request and even wanted to hear about projects the continuation of the effort toward the Nile. Rommel proposed the occupation of Malta to eliminate the threat to shipping supplies, but Hitler was limited to a few general observations. Rommel requested guidelines for the further conduct of operations in North Africa, but received a response worthy of the Sibilla. That night and the next morning Westphal spoke at length with Gen. Jodl, looking for enlightenment or support, but not derived more. Was that, at the latest by the beginning of the summer, Auchinleck was again attacked; but it rattled the indifference to the African Theater. Of course Hitler and the OKW had not realized the importance of the match which was played in Libya, particularly after the intervention of the United States, however there was some mitigating circumstance. The direction of the war in Russia had caused an earthquake: within two months, the Commander-in-Chief of the army, von Brauchitsch, was sacked, and the three commanders of the armed group on the Russian front, von Rundsted, von Bock and von Leeb, had resigned. The Soviet counteroffensive, begun in December, was not yet complete, although with increasingly poor results, and wear of the German divisions was terrible, so much so that the OKW estimated 800,000 other men required to retake the offensive in 1942.

In such circumstances was a Rommel resigned to having to fight alone-a little like Hannibal the Carthaginian Senate-respect for your own ideas, what, accompanied by Cavallero, showed up on March 18 by Mussolini to propose to take Malta and then conquer Tobruk. If the preparations for Malta had required more time than anticipated, he was willing to change the order of targets and attack Tobruk first. Mussolini did not compromise, but Rommel the conviction of having convinced. However, for the time being, the problem could be operating to prevent the consolidation of the opponent and, on the other hand, to strengthen the army. The first goal was achievable within a short time (two or three months) in relation to the development of logistical apparatus, using a real attack from DAK and XX Corps for the Elimination of the British armored forces. The second purpose,

land security, required adequate infantry density resistance position, to which shelter the armored corps could remain ready to crush any penetration or turning move.

Everything explained in his reply, Cavallero was fully in the spirit of the directives of 11 February, as well as the advance eastward once taken Tobruk <sup>(15)</sup>. This was exact is highly questionable, and probably the statement he wanted to minimize the failure to timely notice of the interview of March 18 in Rome. However, we felt Rommel embodying things. Begged Bastico to send him with Gen. Barbasetti and these <sup>(16)</sup> illustrated a long letter addressed to the Comando Superiore, in which he exhibited widely his matured thought of course ... According to the well-known interview:

“While his [the Army] task so far was to protect the Tripolitania with the conduct of mobile warfare in Cyrenaica-if necessary, abandoning even the Cyrenaica itself-according to the directives of the Duce of 18 March, the army must:

- a) maintain possession solidly Southeast margin of Cyrenaica as a trampoline,
- b) begin preparations for the attack itself (...).

To keep firmly in hand, according to orders, this trampoline and to achieve a favorable situation for the continuation of the attack, the army intends to occupy a front along the line south of Mechili-Der Sciahra Bu-South to Tmimi, continuing to do this the XXI Corps and troops so far deployed in the defense of Central Cyrenaica and ready for use mobile behind the Center (...) the two motorized Corps.

Because in this way the army will have gathered the bulk of its forces on the Southeast margin of Cyrenaica, to carry out its new tasks, the Comando Superiore is requested to take the safety of the Ajdabiya district. Also please do come in Armored Division *Littorio* to the Chaulan area and put it under army command.

Generally speaking, the Army Command please put, possibly soon, its dependencies, *all* troops that are already in Africa and provided for a continuation of the attack, to make possible a *joint training* for the intended use.

The letter continued with specific requests, whose meeting was placed in the hands of Comando Superiore and Gen. von Rintelen. Between the Italian burden needs included the completion of all divisions (for the *Ariete* needed at least 200 tanks), two battalions of armored cars for the XX Corps, divisional equipment and Army Corps on wheels and increased of batteries of 88. Von Rintelen was interested how concerned the DAK and is relief-for a speech at the Comando Supremo intended



to obtain the *Centauro* Arm. Div., the motorization of two Inf. Div. (one X and one of the XXI Corps) and the complete medium artillery and heavy gauge; to encourage maritime transport and to ensure supplies of Italian troops "to the same extent as provided for German troops" <sup>(17)</sup>.

Barbasetti had been listening, limited to few objections. Felt, Commander of *Panzerarmee*, observed the directive of the Duce to "ensure the protection of Benghazi against attacks from the South and Southeast, through the occupation of the zone in front of Ajdabiya?" Yes, said Rommel, the above-mentioned protection was provided indirectly by the device pushed until Bir Tengeder. Barbasetti was convinced and proposed to formulate a question put to the Comando Supremo, but his spokesman refused categorically, saying that for him to be out of the question and that he had no need to ask anything and that it had already decided. It wasn't excessive moving 500 kilometers imposed on the XXI Corps in logistical terms? Barbasetti still asked. This observation was met and obtained that the movement was carried out very gradually.

When he received the letter of Rommel and had Barbasetti report (March 26), Bastico referred to Cavallero but without expressing opposition to the perspective of the German General. Basically, more or less agreed: well knew that express themselves in terms of divisions was an account of another force. The situation of the Italian large units, in late March, was as follows:

| Divisions                 | Men   | Inf. Bn. | Arm. Bn. | Art Groups. |
|---------------------------|-------|----------|----------|-------------|
| Available to Com.         |       |          |          |             |
| Superior.                 | 2,400 | 3        | 1        | -           |
| <i>Littorio</i> Arm Div.  | 2,900 | 4        | -        | 3           |
| <i>Bologna</i> Inf. Div.  |       |          |          |             |
| X Corps:                  | 3,800 | 5        | -        | 4           |
| <i>Brescia</i> Inf. Div.  | 4,300 | 4        | -        | 3           |
| <i>Pavia</i> Inf. Div.    |       |          |          |             |
| XX Corps:                 | 3,700 | 3        | 2        | 4           |
| <i>Ariete</i> Arm Div.    | 5,700 | 4        | -        | 5           |
| <i>Trieste</i> Mot. Div.  |       |          |          |             |
| XXI Corps:                | 4,700 | 4        | -        | 4           |
| <i>Sabratha</i> Inf. Div. | 4,700 | 6        | -        | 4           |
| <i>Trento</i> Inf. Div.   |       |          |          |             |

Even on the less convincing argument, Bastico ended to allow: "Given that & Rommel's personality & task entrusted to him, I cannot exclude & I then accept the thesis sustained by him of

*indirect defense of Benghazi-Ajdabiya*”<sup>(18)</sup>, however took some precautions with available units in the area.

Cavallero's response came on April 1:

“After having examined reports with your 01/4863 of 28 March about proposals of General Rommel, Duce has established the following:

- 1) Reinforcement of the advanced line eastward is appropriate and useful.
- 2) Moreover, employment zone begin with adequate force Ajdabiya remains peremptory condition that must be satisfied with direct protection.
- 3) That employment must also protect planned constitution advanced logistic base, without which no further East operation can be accomplished; need for it no less than two divisions;
- 4) To meet the needs of that number one, Duce authorizes move forward the *Bologna* Division, what will bring this Division — one of those of the XXI Army Corps on the advanced line;
- 5) Furthermore, in order to give greater consistency to the advanced line array-Mechili Tmimi, Duce has both given earlier to the reconstitution of the infantry divisions there spread;
- 6) Comando Supremo will also accelerate sending already scheduled armored car units;
- 7) The two divisions that will spread the area will pass directly to Ajdabiya Supercomando & must remain under one command. Make proposals for the XXI Army Corps command”<sup>(19)</sup>.

Above and what follows is the practical demonstration of the disorder that can be caused by unclear directives or little weighted. When a commander in suborder, albeit at a high level, misunderstands the thought of the superior or find room for interpretations of convenience, it is good practice to attribute responsibility to the next level. Examine a critical comparison of conceptions Rommel and Cavallero-Bastico, wisely, had put a bit aside, seeing himself leapfrogged it with such ease at the top and at the bottom-is sometimes historical level, sterile exercise being known subsequent events, but it seems undeniable that, if Rommel had another temperament, in all likelihood the *Panzerarmee* would remain for months on the positions of el Agheila and would move-if it had not been preceded by the opponent-too late to hope for success.

Received the message of Cavallero, Bastico was forced to reveal that what he reportedly " *not already proposals but to decisions that Rommel has already considered taking, even before the famous interview of March 25 with Barbasetti, using given faculty guidelines of 11 February and 24 March*” and asked if it was the case of pointing your feet. Since the movements of XXI Corps had just begun<sup>(20)</sup>.

Later in the evening made a sequel. Giving for granted Rommel's insistence not to modify the orders given and not to surrender a corps and a division already under his orders, enclosing also a matter of personal prestige as commanders of Corps and a Division, wanted to know how to behave in the interview set with Rommel for the morning of April 3 at Barce:

"If (...) I need show me intransigent (what most likely would lead to a clear mutual stance) or if, made every effort because Rommel replaced his orders in full conformity with the telegram 30460, I may eventually-as alert-I would compromise on provisions already given by him and already partly implemented (...)".

To reconcile the opposing viewpoints, Bastico advanced the proposal to consider guaranteed protection of Ajdabiya with the *Bologna* location in area and other elements of power altogether to a Division <sup>(21)</sup>. Cavallero stiffened and the literal claims compliance with the directives of the March 31, <sup>(22)</sup>. Therefore all the conditions existed for a frontal clash among allies, instead at Barce proved to be unexpectedly devoid of bitterness. Rommel took note of reports by Bastico, ceded the *Sabratha* and retained the XXI Corps, to which he had already assigned the *Trento* (now commanded by Gen. Scotti) and the German 90<sup>th</sup> Light.

The agreement lasted very short. Rommel's misinterpretation about British intentions provoked a counter move and this once clarify the situation, led to a change of sides that sparked a new hornet's nest. The sequence began on April 5. Aerial observation had reported an intense road traffic in both directions, East of Tobruk and the presence of a thousand tanks on the railroad line Bir Misheifa-fort Capuzzo, built by the 8<sup>th</sup> army after the arrest of *Crusader*. Other news and radio intercepts led, that day, to believe that the enemy was preparing an imminent offensive. In the evening, though, more and more careful analysis did change my command of *Panzerarmee*: probably detected movements tended to eviction of Gazala, under the protection of elements arranged cover alignment Gasr el Ambar-Bir Temrad-Segnali Nord-Bir Tengeder. Of this, Rommel ordered Crispus, for the next morning, an action with three columns with the task of occupying these positions: the 90<sup>th</sup> Light to Gasr el-Ambar; Marcks grouping on Bir Temrad and XX Corps on the Segnali Nord. The southern flank was to be protected by the German 288<sup>th</sup> special unit <sup>(23)</sup>.

On the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> columns moved without encountering difficulties reaching their objectives by noon and openly consolidating. However, the progress of operations and the aerial reconnaissance of the day not confirmed predictions about the retreat of the British 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, and did, however, think that it had established the safety line along the alignment Ain el-Mteifer el Chebir Gazala – Bir Hakeim and the resistance position alignment Acromael Adem.

Rommel was uncertain. While wanting (or seeming to want) to retain the position of resistance to Halegh el Eleba -Tmimi-Mechili, the points achieved (Gasr el Ambar-Bir Temrad- Segnali Nord) seemed not convincing as advanced structure: to the North could improve the situation going up at Gazala, if it had been loosely watched; South guard was going up at Bir Tengeder, although the town was still in enemy hands. Thus, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light on 7 April pointed to Gazala, but faced with the unexpected resistance encountered, stopped; Instead, the German 580<sup>th</sup> Recon company found Bir Tengeder clearing, which was held by the 11<sup>th</sup> Hussars.

At this point, Bastico, which followed on the movements of German and Italian troops saw emerge one interspersing of units, which had little defensive device-the 90<sup>th</sup> slightly west of Gazala, the *Trento* South of Tmimi, Marcks grouping at Bir Temrad and Sidi Breghisc, the XX Corps in the Segnali Nord area, the *Brescia* at el-Mechili, the *Pavia* at el-Ezzeiat and the bulk of the DAK West of Tmimi -asking to know the intentions of the *Panzerarmee* and, on this occasion, transmitted a telegram of the Comando Supremo, with whom Mussolini (i.e. Cavallero) warned: "*be careful not to make the game of the enemy, that might have an interest in demanding forward then counter-attack in dangerous directions*" and invited to pay attention to the rear <sup>(24)</sup>. Mancinelli said not to be again managed to get an explicit reply from Rommel, but knew of the decision to transfer the bulk of the army on line Gasr el Ambar-Bir Tengeder, who seemed better both as resistance position both as a basis for further advanced. In fact, the bulletin issued the *Panzerarmee* was significant from the 7<sup>th</sup>: "*Defense Organization with advanced elements on the line reached, that is of particular importance for the defense of Cyrenaica and the preparation of future*" <sup>(25)</sup>. It is true that you do not overreach yourself yet; but Rommel replying to Comando Superiore, in relation to the dispatch of Rome, left little doubt: "*I have taken account of the directives of the Duce by the fact that the army has no*

*advanced beyond line- Temrad-Segnali-Bir Tengeder, where you're placing a defense (...)*”.

Bastico was annoyed and regretted not having immediately "against" Rommel. A little because between Ain el Gazala-Tobruk and Bir Hachein seemed to make 4-5,000 enemy vehicles, a little because he believes the move was made necessary by special reasons, but especially because of the logistical situation. As mentioned above, Rommel was inclined to overlook the matter in his plans, particularly services above all against the Italians, but for objectivity, it should be recalled that he was not the only one: Gambarà, shortly before, had silenced Montezemolo, stating quite enough that the “*must adapt logistics to serve the needs of tactics!*” The letter of Bastico was very clear. Given that the Comando Superiore was unable to replace the large number of worn-out vehicles in recent days, and alarmed Italian commanders requested; Since the delegation of Intendenza couldn't move forward their own. corps, as called for by the same masters, for failing to timely notice about moving the location of resistance, became “*necessary today meets with facings and sacrifices to the logistics situation resulting from a shift not predisposed*”. In fact, it was accomplished a sort of wide conversion: limited to the North (about 25 km, from to Tmimi Gasr el-Ambar), sensitive to the South in desert terrain (approx. 70 km, from Bir el-Mechili to Tengeder). Gioda had claimed to be unable to solve the “serious” logistics situation of X Corp determined by movement, without assignment of vehicles “*needed to ensure life in full desert of my troops*” and for the needs of combat; Baldassarre, appointed by the army transport Command of the *Brescia* and *Pavia*, had asked for at least a hundred trucks; Rommel himself had touched the key vehicles urging the inflow of the remaining units of the *Trento*.

Already on 3 April Bastico had stressed as the still incomplete services framework imposed a certain progressiveness in the operating field, less than military pressure dependent on the will of the enemy, so he returned to the topic in the dry tone:

“I must tell-wrote Rommel-that vehicles fuel, & situation gived even now carried out consumption, it could improve as it is in our program, which is also delayed by new supplies & extension can now be more easily disturbed by the opponent, because the greater proximity to it of the new line of resistance of your choice. Please bear in mind the foregoing, whereas

any delay is not imposed on us by the enemy in the reorganization program that you and I hope that it is aimed at and make us each day an advantage over the enemy, results in a benefit to the enemy”<sup>(26)</sup>.

Then wrote two letters to Rome: to a Comando Supremo official and to Cavallero unofficial. In the first laid out the facts and declared that he made every effort to overcome gradually the further difficulties created<sup>(27)</sup>. In the second he criticized Rommel harshly: “*animated by an ambition that manifests itself, from this often drive and since it supports the practice of large units, command falls in excess of which I believe he does not include the scope*”; asked that were invoked in a most serene situation assessment and noted that it would be appropriate that any further directive should get to him “*not directly*” through the Comando Superiore<sup>(28)</sup>.

It should be added that he turned even the commanders of Army Corps, admonish him seriously concerning requests submitted to the Comando Superiore: media and units were brought to completion progressively divisions that landed from the *motherland*, therefore, apart from some temporary aid, each body must rely on sole available forces. And added:

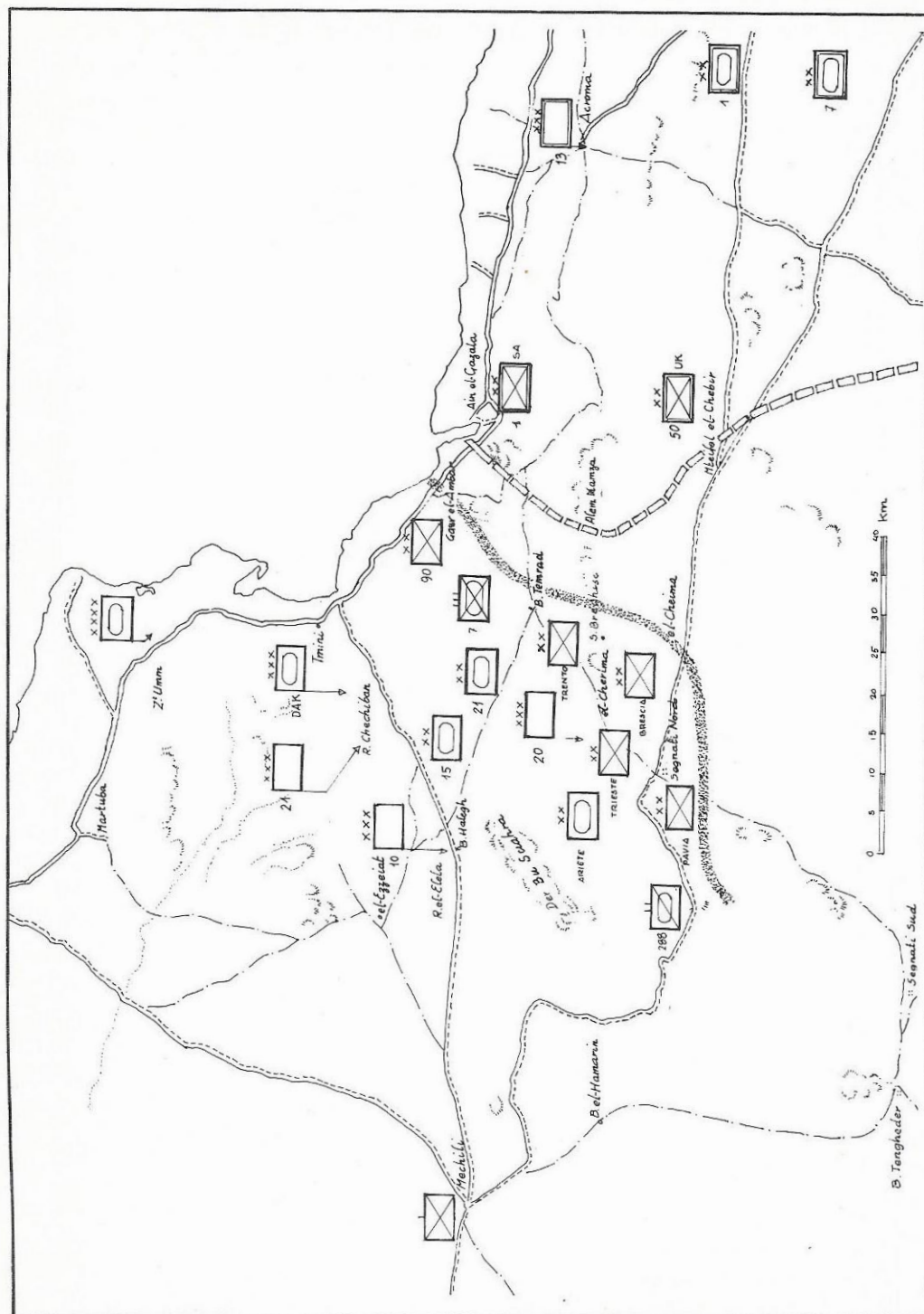
“It is the duty of all Corps commanders tell the authorities consumption timely which receive operational orders, exposing their own possibilities and exactly asking them explicitly contests that must be granted to it is by the above-mentioned authority to achieve any more operational achievements tasks from these authorities may entrusted to them. Give at these possible assignment of authority to aid this command it is unacceptable & it is proved completely wrong because so far who has given you it is based on incomplete elements (...)”.

The movements were concluded before the 25<sup>th</sup>. The XXI Corps had the 90th Light on the Balbia, the 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri a little further South, the *Trento* in the Bir Temrad -Sidi Breghisc (where was deployed a tactical group of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light); the X Corps was collected at the turn of the Trigh Capuzzo, with the *Pavia* (now commanded by Gen. Torriano) and *Brescia*. The first detachments sent to Bir Tengeder and Segnali Sud had been withdrawn and replaced by the 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn. In second line were the DAK, Northwest of Bir Temrad, and XX Corps in the area of el-Cherima. At Mechili, initially entrusted to the III/20<sup>th</sup> infantry, remained a company complements of *Brescia* (sketch No. 15).

The new line, though he had the advantages to dominate for long before the extension, to be shorter than the previous one (about 65

LO SCHIERAMENTO DELLA PANZERARMEE AFRIKA  
a fine aprile

Schizzo n. 15



a hundred kilometers), to effectively protect accesses to Cyrenaica, to follow better the intentions and the enemy's moves and to shorten significantly the first leap in cases of offensive, made more difficult, however, because supplies of greater distance from logistics centers, offers a natural environment more inconvenient to the troops, delayed the completion of program features. This last drawback your allocation more sensitive to the fact that the enemy, having given the impression of being the forward thrust of the German-Italian forces had begun a bold reaction based on attacks against the new positions.

In fact, since the afternoon of April 8 mechanized units had attacked the XI/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and occupied hill 112 (six kilometers west to Gasr el-Ambar), but the next day, they were driven back by a counter-attack. Other mechanized units had repeated the attempt on April 14 in different sections of the deployment of XX Corps, and further attacks had occurred, with equal fail, on 27 April, in the area Segnali Sud and Bir Tengeder.

Efficient armored vehicles totaled 419 tanks (268 German and 151 Italian) and 58 German armored cars. He was asked about the influx of the 11th tank battalion (52 tanks) and the XII company, belonging to the *Littorio* and located in Tripolitania, but the Comando Supremo had responded negatively. The British gave us, according to agreed statements of prisoners, 350 tanks and, for our part, it was assumed that the opponent had in Cyrenaica of efficient 555 tanks and 375 armored cars, and in the Delta of 125 tanks and 25 other armored cars.

The April 29 meeting in Berchtesgaden, Hitler and Mussolini, both with a large following. For the military part was attended by Keitel and Cavallero. The 30<sup>th</sup>, from 11:00 to 14:00, was examined the strategic situation. Specifically, Libya also had to be prepared against Tunisia, for the eventuality that France openly takes a hostile attitude to the Axis. The main point, though, was another. It was to decide whether to give precedence to the conquest of Malta or to Tobruk, including in this the pitched battle against the 8<sup>th</sup> army. After a mature consideration, the choice of Hitler-fundamental, because without the participation of Germany the Malta enterprise became impossible-fell on Tobruk: beginning in late May or early June.



## 2. MALTA AND TOBRUK?

On October 14, 1941 Cavallero had written in his diary: "*Invited Gen. Roatta told to study an action for the occupation of Malta: requirement C 3. Given the impossibility of being able to claim Bizerte, such action becomes indispensable*". Therefore, a logical choice, given Hitler's reluctance to force France's hand. At that moment to have originated a concrete and organic design for the conquest of the island, does not mean that the problem had not been taken into careful consideration. Far from it. However, various circumstances had, from time to time, to set aside the idea; even if-it is good to say right away-the issue was seen by many with skepticism and all as very ponderous.

The first hint about it is seen at its meeting from Graziani, Chief of staff of the R. Army, on June 5, 1940, where Adm. Cavagnari, Chief of staff of the R. Navy, is expressed negatively about the success of such an operation, evidently on the basis of a draft prepared some months earlier and ongoing studies. The new developed presented on 18 June next by the Supermarina, under the title «Malta» investment, included two preconditions: a bombing of several consecutive days to "*produce the greatest devastation and to exhaust the anti-aircraft ammunition*" and a close blockade by submarines, torpedo boats and Mas. These premises had to follow the landing of a Corps of 20,000 men "*with only automatic light weapons, hand grenades and daggers, flamethrower, units of light tanks*", using flat-bottomed boats, fishing boat type, and the launch of paratroopers. All supported by the fire of the entire fleet and by a very low flying attack aircraft.

The project appeared clearly to "have sketched out by the Office", it was so pervaded by reserves and estimated, and led to conclusions in line with the thought expressed by Cavagnari:

"Given the exceptional difficulty of the undertaking and that there should be dedicated, it would be justified only if Malta was a decisive goal.

But, England having long ago decided not to use it as a main base of operations, the threat from Malta can be exercised against our communications and against our naval bases is of secondary importance.

It is sufficient that with bombing raids, with ambushes of submarine and (when necessary) with torpedo, night cruises continue to be made impossible to stay in Valletta of important naval forces, to be

undermined the movement of those few that are there, to be barred from supplying the island.

Malta will fall in our hands as a result of the victory obtained by concentrating all energies in theater containing objectives resolved”<sup>(29)</sup>.

Partly because of such considerations, in part because of the belief that the war was already won Germany's, and therefore not worth engaging in particularly difficult operations, the decision was taken to "sterilize" Malta through a continual pounding entrusted to the 2nd Air Fleet in Sicily. Are known the failure of such sterilization and, conversely, the continuous upgrading of Maltese defense in all sectors.

In January 1941 Hitler identified must help Mussolini, as the critic of the war in Albania and Libya. In addition to sending the X *Fliegerkorps* to Sicily and the *Deutsches Afrikakorps* to North Africa, the Führer was persuaded by Adm. Raeder to take into serious consideration the opportunity to take Malta to solve many of the problems of the Mediterranean port. Initially the enterprise was considered the whole of Germany, therefore, its implementation was postponed until after the defeat of the Soviet Union. However the plan, prepared in February-March 1941, was based on a landing from the air, with a parachute and Airborne Division; a landing from the sea was intended simply as a subsidiary action. The heavy losses incurred by paratroopers in the conquest of Crete left falling for a few months every intention towards Malta. Moreover, for how effective were the raids conducted by X *Fliegerkorps*, also the "neutralization" of the island remained an unfulfilled desire.

If Berlin every attention was paid to the imminent opening of Russian Theatre of operations, in Rome, of course, any thoughts focused on overseas supplies, and then to Malta (and Bizerte). On 7 May with Genn. Guzzoni, Vice Chief of the General staff, asked the Staffs of armed force a re-evaluation of the problem. Adm. Riccardi, which for several months had replaced Adm. Cavagnari and always kept up to date study S.M. 71 S. relative to the enterprise, said that the capture of Malta would represent a marked improvement in the situation and losses which it would involve would be amply compensated by the term of the pestering and cumbersome fix-up-visibly of maritime traffic with Libya. However, increasing the island's defenses now demanded a corps of 30,000 men, landing with ad hoc boats provided possibly from Germany, and,

as a whole, it appeared complex and difficult to require preparation of at least six months and pose very serious risks.

Given the *important* air and naval co-operation, as well as the limited possibility of surprise, the memorandum of Riccardi concluded:

“7. However consider the operation, will appear all the difficulties in the technical field, complement and executive. In any case it would not run before the end of the year to meet necessary to prepare the means and needs of training men.

It comes fact of wondering whether we should deal with the difficult problem, taking particularly into account the time required to have good chance of fixing it in our favor”<sup>(30)</sup>.

Pricolo's response, by a few months the Chief of staff of the R. Air Force, was pretty generic: was to have five bomber squadrons, five groups of fighters, and two squadrons of torpedo bombers, in addition to a part of bombers in Puglia and in Libya<sup>(31)</sup>. There was a comparison of needs and possibilities, or warranties or doubts of being able to provide the air support necessary. For the R. Army the speech was different and the main point was a training troops entrusted with supporting the landing from the sky. In General, all agreed that can take only Malta with an operation in "great style". With that, the problem Malta was again sidelined, although not abandoned.

In the fall, before the British Force K based on the island began its activity, the issue returned to pressing nature on the floor. Cavallero was a place with a decided: claimed (a) if the Organization's top management, through a joint study Committee (Gen. Gandin, Adm. Giroi and Gen. A.A. Cappa), and solicited and the Staffs of armed forces. R. Navy undertook the establishment of Special naval force intended operation, whose command Adm. Turr in charge, and a Naval landing Force (the San Marco Regiment, a grouping of black shirts and parachute units of the R. Navy). the Army began training *Folgore* Par. Div., *La Spezia* Air Landing Div., and *Livorno* and *Superga* Inf. Divs.

From the German side, Mar. Kesselring, since the early reconnaissance flights, became convinced of the “*intolerable threat that Malta was for our supply routes and made me understand the crucial importance of the Mediterranean for the progress of the war*”<sup>(32)</sup>, so he showed himself not only agree on the need for “*Malta is made*

*inefficient and this to insure transport between Italy and I.N.A. and air supremacy in this space*", as expressed in defining the task of the II *Fliegerkorps*, surrounded in Sicily to replace the X<sup>(33)</sup>, but also in the reserve to 2 *Luftflotte*, more powerful and better equipped technically, the neutralization of maritime and aerial offensive capability of the island.

During the month of January 1942 all seemed to go well, thanks also to the very serious blow by our special transport to the Mediterranean Fleet, on Christmas Eve, and shipping losses went down by 70-80% to 20-30%. As far as the preliminary design was completed, were standing some aspects whose solution was not at all easy: with mine barrage in the Strait of Sicily, the island's blockade with minefields, the availability of motorized sailing boats (the choice had fallen on the German *Siebel-fahr* landing craft and on special pontoons Italians in three propellers), the availability of paratroopers. And most importantly, loomed ever stronger the usefulness of a German aid.

The attitude of Hitler and the OKW had been indifferent at first, then negative. As we know, the warning was not determined by the considerable losses sustained by Airborne Corps in Crete and the expectation that Malta would have been a feat even harder. But in February, after the happy escape from Brest of battle cruisers *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst*, along with the *Prinz Eugen* to the North Sea, despite the British guard, Raeder and Kesselring returned to the job, separately.

Raeder had participated at the Axis naval commands Conference in Garmisch (Jan. 14-15), during which had emerged the unanimous agreement on the importance of occupation of Malta, according to the plan of the Comando Supremo, as soon as circumstances permitted. On the 13<sup>th</sup> the Grand Admiral was received by Hitler and, after a brief look on the various scenic shorelines, stopped on the Mediterranean:

"The situation in this sea is definitely conducive in present time. If we look at in connection with the events of the Far East, it will claim the information on the possibility of launching an attack against Egypt and the Suez Canal (...). Now, the supply of naphtha for the Australia and New Zealand must arrive or from the Persian Gulf or from America (...). Suez and Basra are the pillars of the British positions in the Middle East: If these positions fall under the weight of a concerted pressure on the Axis, the consequences for the British Empire will be disastrous. According to trusted information, the British know what grave danger are exposed in Egypt. They fear that the German-Italian forces may contact the

Japanese. These, in turn, are honestly trying to make contact with the Germans by sea and by land (...).

The victory in the Mediterranean depends on two factors: the maritime power and naval-ground cooperation. The Navy cannot operate without the foundations that the army must capture and hold; the army cannot operate without the help and protection of airpower; and this, in turn, depends on the Navy for supplies and the army for the basics. The Mediterranean strategy, therefore, must coordinate these three factors, to ensure success: the maritime power that ensures supplies, supplies that ensure the foundations, the foundations that ensure maritime power. The key of this circle is a central base from which, and by far the most important in the Mediterranean is the Malta Island fortress”<sup>(34)</sup>.

The conclusion of was that Raeder considered indispensable seize Malta as soon as possible and launch an offensive against the Suez Canal within the current year. However, given the reluctance of Hitler against the operation, added that, if there was determined the occupation of the island, was essential to the continuation of the aerial bombardment. Hitler, who relied, in fact, the depletion of Malta by an uninterrupted offense from heaven, admitted the validity of the above by Raeder, but with many mental reserves.

Kesselring also intervened, without knowing of the initiative of the Fleet Admiral. In February, at the Führer Headquarters, supported the argument with great force of the indispensability of the operation, so that the dictator said to “*Be quiet, Marshal Kesselring, will act as soon as possible*”<sup>(35)</sup>. However limited, for now, to order a reinforcement of aerial blockage and to reassure Mussolini: the Führer is in full agreement with the Italian Command-told Kesselring in Rome-for final action against the island of Malta (...) will give all the support possible. The support had to be considerable: a Division parachutists, gliders and transport aircraft. In a May 12 report, Raeder returned with vigor on the need to work in harmony with Japan, which seemed to be attacking from the East of the Suez Canal zone, if the Axis had attacked from the West, and invited to take advantage of an “*opportunity would not longer repeated*”<sup>(36)</sup>. Hitler agreed on this thesis, however, retained more than a reserve about Malta. While recognizing the implied right of Italy ambitions, did not believe the Italians able to conduct such an operation, and on the other hand, considered very difficult indeed, if felt to decide on a crucial German participation without mature reflection.

In Rome the ideas were, meanwhile, increasingly clear and even the Japanese, consulted, had expressed their view on

the basis of the experiences in Southeast Asia and the Pacific: rigorous secrecy, careful discussion of every single aspect of the plan (to be run at any cost, once approved), usefulness of mountain troops, force entities to ensure a considerable superiority over the enemy, use ground troops without any hesitation (i.e. regardless of loss), desirability of landing on the islands of Gozo and Comiso. Indeed, the cooperation offered by the Japanese mission headed by the Adm. Abe went up to the point of drafting a separate invasion plan, so as to allow a comparative study with the Italian. The confrontation took place at the meetings of 5-6 March and found significant differences. In practice, on almost all points of primary importance the opinions differed: draft maneuver, landing body entity, time and duration of the operation, harmonization of the air co-operation. However, this disagreement had only theoretical weight, not being restricted to the Japanese thought.

Instead between OKW and Comando Supremo acquired, through doubtful silence or detached first, a lack of substantial agreement. It was, in fact, studying the great summer offensive in Russia, whose air support called for the recall of parts of the Air Corps involved in the Mediterranean. It was, thus, at that inevitable that big worries for the theatre of Russian operations resulted in the adoption of half-measures in the Mediterranean and that Hitler approve without real conviction the draft project for the conquest of Malta. However, this does not affect the big aerial bombardment which Kesselring was preparing. These 12 March held to report to Catania airport to all German commanders concerned, up to and including the level of the group. *“The aim is to neutralize the island-stated-of course a complete neutralization can be ensured only with the occupation of the island itself. For now, as the first objective to be achieved, remains the destruction of all offensive and defensive accommodations of the Island”* <sup>(37)</sup>. The Gen. Loerzer, Commander of the II *Fliegerkorps*, illustrated his plan, divided into three phases, and the OBS, in agree in principle, does not set a deadline for achieving the goal, while expressing the hope that four weeks would be sufficient.

A few days later, the 17<sup>th</sup>, Kesselring went with von Rintelen by Cavallero and put out that within a short time the action of force on Malta was over, then the tasks of II *Luftflotte* were revised. Cavallero replied that the preparation for the landing proceeded briskly and that *"we have the firm intention to be*

ready at the end of July. "The units intended for action were: a parachute Division, an Airborne Division, two landing divisions, *San Marco* Regiment (two battalions), a CC.NN grouping. (four battalions), share of tanks.

For paratroopers was the collaboration of Gen. Ramcke, but it would have been useful a reinforcement of some German battalion.

Because at the time, obviously it was necessary to prevent a solution of continuity between the end of intensive aerial bombardment (roughly placed in mid-April) and the final tuning of the instrument landing (roughly: late July), not only for the success of the operation, but also for the benefit of our overseas transport. At this point, von Rintelen "*asks whether, if a particularly favorable situation, the operation for the conquest of Malta cannot be expected before time*". Kesselring knew himself and stated that "*we must be always ready to act, even with few means,*" alluding to an attempt by the South, where the Maltese were almost non-existent defenses, and that "*If the opportunity presents itself, it would be a crime not to exploit*", where, in this case, "an opportunity to attempt even a simple coup de main."

Cavallero replied that "*the fully prepared itself also includes the case of an incomplete preparation, action from occurring if the circumstances were to suggest the specialty*" and added that it would study a type of intervention with *coup de main* character, though it is not likely that it's felt assumptions. That on the whole matter an indefinable sense of lingering distrust of Germany, can be supported by a final question posed by von Rintelen: the OKW wished to know whether the Comando Supremo considered seriously the operation against Malta<sup>(38)</sup>. Of course received confirmation.

On the morning of 21 March ended, in the presence of Cavallero, a series of meetings initiated the 19<sup>th</sup> on the *requirement* C3. It was examining the studies presented by Adm. Turr and Gen. Sogno and explained to the Comando Supremo for the *coup de main*. Apart from the employment of Gozo, deemed indispensable by Turr and not equally dreamy, the opinion was unanimous: launch of paratroopers and then landing in the last hours of the night; choice of the area south of the island for the invasion from the sea; total landings of the first contingent (24,000 men with 32 guns and 30-60 tanks) with landing craft propelled only when ready or in preparation; influx of reinforcements with steamers after the occupation of Marsaxlokk Bay or other suitable. A *coup de main*, to be realized in the short term, demanded, in the opinion of the Comando

Supremo particular conditions of the Island as well as a very low morale of the defenders and was based on the launch of at least one parachute Division and the landing of ad hoc items. As the landing craft available were the ones prepared for requirement C 2 (Corsica), it was the only option to use *San Marco* Regiment and the CC.NN grouping with very little material.

Cavallero observed that the necessity of a *colpo di mano* could occur in May, as a result of the intensive bombing and in the event that you ever looked like a strong recall of part of II *Luftflotte* for operations on the Russian front. Now, at that time was to exclude the availability of Italian paratroopers and this would involve the use of only German units; obvious solution suggested considered avoiding. It was to continue the study, taking into account the lack of paratroopers. In the diary, however, Cavallero commented that "*you cannot talk about coup nor action before the end of June* [probably interpreted as July]" <sup>(39)</sup>, and in the afternoon, at Ciampino airport, was able to confirm that point of view.

Back to Rastenburg, where he had gone again to put the Führer aware of the situation in the Mediterranean, Kesselring brought confirmation of approval of Hitler to the maximum, the standardization of guarantee of a couple of German battalions and a number of light tanks and gliders. Also informed him that the air offensive of the II *Luftflotte*, which started on March 20, would last ten or fifteen days in massive form, then four Air Groups were diverted to other duties. Cavallero, who saw the failure of landing operation "*a true moral disaster*" for Italy, just replicate that Italian troops would be ready only at the end of July.

Two days later, Kesselring returned to the topic: "*Kesselring insists for Malta-noted Cavallero in his diary-through the implementation of the coup. Accurate: the action has produced results so complete that you can do as you want? And then: with what arrives? Our paratroopers are not ready.*"

The air offensive had unleashed with tremendous violence. The waves arrived on Malta aircraft three times daily, at 8:30 am, 12:30 and 18:00 and whenever raging for an hour with devastating effect, with very serious concerns in London about the fate of the island. At end-March stocks of Gen. Dobbie, Governor of Malta, were considered sufficient for three months in food and gasoline and only



a month and a half in ammunition; so Cunningham wanted to make a supreme effort to make a big supply by sea with the convoy M.W.10. Four ships, escorted by that available in Alexandria to four light cruisers and ten destroyers, constituting the Force B commanded by the Amm. Vian-had to sail from Alexandria on March 20. Since Cunningham had expected his meeting with the Italian Fleet on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Vian was oriented to try to escape the fighting until nightfall, leaving the convoy at night then onto Malta with six small escort destroyers, and thus free to deal with the action

The contest to succeed of the mission was to be General: Force H, under the command of Adm. Syfret, it would move the convoy from Gibraltar with the battleship *Malaya*, the aircraft carriers *Eagle* and *Argus*, the light cruiser *Hermion* and eight destroyers, to create a threat and to reinforce Malta's aviation with aircraft launched from two aircraft carriers; the Royal Air Force would attack with the greatest violence of Cyrenaica and airports of Crete; the 8<sup>th</sup> Army would put in place the second day (March 22) Operation *Fullsize*, a mimic of advanced to distract attention from the Italian 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet and of *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika*; the reduced Force K (a cruiser and a destroyer) would be exit from Malta on the evening of 22<sup>nd</sup> in order to strengthen the remaining escort of the convoy on the morning of the third day (23 March).

The first news arrived in Rome on the morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> had been sighted Force H, exit from Gibraltar. At 16:30 the 21<sup>st</sup> were reported Force B of Vian and the convoy. Immediately *Supermarina* and *Superaereo* issued in agreement, orders for air intervention against Force H and naval interception of convoy. The first was out of range of aerial action from Sardinia, on the afternoon of the 22<sup>nd</sup> launched a about thirty *Spitfire* to Malta and the following night reversed course to return to Gibraltar.

At 05:00 of 22 March Adm. Vian was certain to have been discovered at sea; However, he did not know the extent of the Italian formation reported in exit from Taranto by a British submarine in the early hours of the morning and, conversely, *Supermarina* did not know that he was aware of the thing, because the message of the submarine was not picked up. In the morning, at 09:40 and 11:10, took place two torpedo attacks of the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet. The escort of fighters, who had accompanied Vian to southernmost limits of autonomy, was turned back: for the first time a British naval force

had no air protection. But came out unscathed from these initial forays.

Meanwhile, the Italian Fleet, under the command of the Adm. Jachino, approached taking on a collision course, was the battleship *Littono*, the heavy cruisers *Gorizia* and *Trento*, from the light cruiser *Giovanni dalle Bande Nere* and four destroyers. Shortly after noon, in the Gulf of Sirte, Vian was planned for combat formation, leaving five destroyers with the convoy. At about 14:30 head ships both sides reported "*enemy in sight*". Vian's fate seemed sealed: they started the attacks of the II *Fliegerkorps* which lasted up to 18:30, then prolonged by 12 S. 79 departed from Catania, and was about to start naval ballistic contact, with two hours prior to British calculations. But in that while the English Admiral received two allies: the worsening weather and a sea whose conditions quickly became cyclonic. The first, boosted by large masses of fog straight without interruption from British ships made visibility poor even for aircraft; the second took effect to the shooting caliber artillery.

At 19:00 the battle, called second battle of Sirte, <sup>(40)</sup> ceased for the onset of darkness. The enemy scored one hit on the *Littorio*, causing minor damage. The Italian Fleet and Axis planes believed to have obtained partial success, but in fact the enemy's losses were negligible: a destroyer sunk by a submarine in the morning; two cruisers and three destroyers not seriously damaged during the action. The convoy, which had suffered 28 attacks going unscathed as well, the sparse formation continued in to Malta, escorted by one light cruiser and eight destroyers, which later joined the two ships of Force K from Malta.

If the 22<sup>nd</sup> had given no direct fruits, resulted in a significant delay to navigation of the convoy, which the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> was still at some distance from the island. Spotted at 07:30 was attacked by German planes: a steamer sunk and a second, *Breconshire*, immobilized and obliged to be towed. To prevent the unloading of supplies, from the 24<sup>th</sup> all German air units pledged to all out, but only the 26<sup>th</sup> the others three steamers were centered and sunk. About 26,000 tons just 5,000 could be discharged; other 2,500 were recovered later by specialized contractors. "*Indescribable was our relief*"-wrote the Adm. Cunningham-*when we learned that the Italians were*

*retreating*” on the evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup> and Vian, returning to Alexandria, was warm and want deserved reception. But, all in all, the purpose of the operation was not achieved even to a small extent.

In Italian-German camp the second battle of Sirte left a negative impression, especially in Germany, and Raeder was able to convince Hitler that only the conquest of Malta could remove the British presence in the Mediterranean. Shooting Rommel's proposals and accepted as inevitable the full German participation to a solution of force, i.e., the landings “Grand Plan” was divided into two distinct phases: operation *Hercules* against Malta and operation *Aida* against Egypt:

“Not until the first had been carried out, the troops in Africa would have to suspend their advance: with the conquest of Malta would make supplies to Rommel, and he would be able to act with the full weight of his forces against the Egyptian bastion”<sup>(41)</sup>.

The month of April was tremendous for Malta: the bombing suffered by it were considered equal to that of Coventry repeated every 18 hours for the entire month. The 10<sup>th</sup>, Kesselring reported that in his opinion Malta was eliminated as naval base and that he intended to continue until April 20; but the next day, “*estimated that with three weeks of similar attention and with the massive use of ammunition, the island can be quite countered*”<sup>(42)</sup>. On the basis of these considerations, and also under the worry of von Rintelen who warned of unknown on departure of parts of the II *Luftflotte*, Cavallero returned to reflect: “*so you have to move on the coup. If this occurred in May, the paratroopers should be supplied from Germany*”<sup>(43)</sup> and preparations accelerated. The 13<sup>th</sup> was a General Staff study of accelerated action and at the same time the continuation of the program. Gen. Favagrossa received orders to give priority to what is necessary for requirement C 3. The staff of the R. Army compiled the “rules of use for large assault Units and landing”; the R. Air Force decided to send to Sicily, between 14 and 18 April, the 4th fighter wing with M C 202, already destined for North Africa. The R. Navy, on the other hand, while pursuing studies and preparation, seemed not very convinced. The 15<sup>th</sup>, Adm. Turr wrote to the Supermarina:

“Examination of naval means listed above it is clear that their use is entirely subject to the assumption of landing points ahead of a very limited reaction (...)”<sup>(44)</sup>,

and the 17<sup>th</sup> the Supermarina held to clarify that until May 15 C 3 was not feasible even as coup; from 15 to 31 May it was, however, a possible contemporary excluding implementation of C 2 (Corsica); from June to 31 July could achieve C 3 with growing naval transport; by August, finally, there would be the possibility of giving full over the operation.

This clarification was to orient the Comando Supremo to draw on arrangements for the *possible* occupation of Corsica, thus clearing the table from a commitment that could not hinder the preparations for Malta. Though it took a more forceful. Just that day von Rintelen had communicated to await the response of the OKW about Italian wishes forwarded by him; so, on the 21<sup>st</sup>, Cavallero went to the Ciampino airport to receive Kesselring. “*The Führer- the answer was -is in principle favorable to the implementation of C3 and need is inclined to provide the means. Certainly send of the gliders and tanks with 88 guns, that can dominate the battlefield*”<sup>(45)</sup>. Frankly, the «General» and «likely» do not appear very convincing, especially as long as Italy had not yet presented a specific note of request but evidently Kesselring was expressed in such a way as to leave no doubts and indeed even von Rintelen was explicit: “*only on 21 April the OKW declared itself ready to support the preparations for the conquest of the island*”<sup>(46)</sup>

After all, how difficult it was to an exact appreciation of the results of the aerial offensive on Malta, was widely evident the havoc caused by the passage of 170 daily and as many fighters and bombers still in progress. Raids against airfields, depots, workshops, dry-docks lasted several hours. At the end of the month on the three airports were affected on the ground no less than 126 aircraft, of which a quarter completely destroyed; another 20 were killed in combat; of 46 Spitfire from the American aircraft carrier *Wasp* on the day 20<sup>th</sup>, 17 were destroyed on the ground just arrived and 29 damaged. In ports were sunk three destroyers, two submarines, three minesweepers, five tugboats, a water tank and the floating crane. It's also true that, in the judgment of Kesselring, the basic objectives of the plan were achieved or were only partially, it provided had not been able to meet the expected succession of three daily raids, both for the enduring effectiveness of anti-aircraft fire<sup>(47)</sup>. On 37 aircraft lost in April (35 German and 2 Italian), 24 were shot down over Malta and 13 of them at the hands of anti-aircraft artillery.

To add that such reactivity induced deemed achieved the neutralization of the island's offensive ability, but not defensive, so that, moreover, were failed those conditions of disability that were evaluated according to a useful use of Italian aircraft. But the serious error was that he had not been able to locate the radar stations: *“every day that stood-said the Air Marshal Lloyd-I expect an attack in style to each of the radar stations and every day spent instead without that should this attack; and I couldn't believe our good fortune continues: We made a few forays almost “blind”’. Fighters are nearly useless for Defense without radars and it is surprising that the Axis does not understand the value of this simple and fundamental fact”* <sup>(48)</sup>.

However, Cavallero took to end the accession of Hitler and prepared the “budget”, which incorporated in a memo intended to Keitel:

“(…) However, even assuming a significant depletion of the will of resistance of the defenders, it is essential to have a high amount of forces and means that you can try to determine *a priori*. This determination has already been made by us in principle. A detailed and thorough examination is underway in cooperation with German comrades.

You can, however, anticipate right now that in addition to the forces and resources we have, predictably would by Germanic (abstraction is made by lower elements that will be specified later):

- 1) combat means: a Division paratroopers, tanks, anti-tank bombs;
- 2) maritime transport: 50 self propelled or similar boats from 100/200 men;
- 3) air transport: 200 Junkers 52, gliders;
- 4): 40,000 tones of fuel oil, to give freedom to maneuver to the fleet against the likely reactions of British naval arms; 12,000 tons of petrol and 500 tons of lubricants for aviation, which does not have the slightest escort.

Prerequisite is, of course, staying in Sicily of the bulk of 2<sup>nd</sup> *Luftflotte*, whose parts in departure will partly replace by the Italian Air Force, while the remainder will provide the African Aviation.

It is time to determine if they can be given; When will be a work in progress. Based on this information you will be able to predict the time of the operation.

For our part, everything you do to be ready soon, aware of the seriousness of the hour and possible disruptive actions of the opponent. "

Each of the requests could be relatively significant for Germany, but Italy effectively was a *condition sine*

*qua non*\*, particularly the last one. In the first quarter had consumed 54,000 tons, more than the quantity received, why in April was given stock fund. On 20 April the departure of a convoy was subject to the availability of naphtha and three battleships had empty tanks. In this situation the skepticism of the R. Navy you couldn't say poorly placed. Cavallero was prepared to argue in person the reminder and meanwhile made the C 3 the *San Marco* Regiment, the Naval Forces group from the landing Beach detachment, 30 motorized sailing boats, 3 motor tankers and a Minelayer claimed for C 2.

On 29 April took place at Klessheim meeting with Keitel, who, as was to be expected, objected immediately impossible to provide in a short time margins a parachute Division, naval transport and 40,000 tons of naphtha. Consequently, since you couldn't not think of putting the enterprise in mid-June, might as well give precedence to the conquest of Tobruk. Put things in these terms, to not remained that Cavallero agreed. And so did, reluctantly, not believing and insisting that, at least, the C 3 was not delayed beyond the first fortnight of July.

The following day, the meeting was held in Berchtesgaden by Hitler, Mussolini also present. After a look at the situation on the Russian front did from Gen. Jodl, Hitler took the word expressing full confidence in victory and making a few remarks on any boards. In this context, expressed the view that it was necessary to provide for the possibility of an intervention against France. Since German troops were limited, the Italy should hold themselves ready "*with appropriate forces, including at least one Armored Division*". After Mussolini's replication that large units available for that purpose would be eight, including one Armored Division, the Führer said that, to deal with every possible case, considered appropriate for two Italian armored divisions in the area of Tripoli. This time it was to respond that Cavallero was already acting in this way, and that a Armored Division "*is already in Tripoli (the Littorio) and will be at full strength in two or three months.*" Hitler made no comments about it and passed on to the issue of Malta: had to be taken from Britain. Immediately Cavallero took the ball to leap and showed the list of how Italy had and that Germany would have to give. "*The Führer promises to meet our demands and, in particular, to give us 12 T 34 heavy tanks (from 52 tons\*\*.) taken from the Russians, with whom get absolute surprise. A tank of this kind is worth a regiment.*" <sup>(49)</sup>

The operation, according to Hitler, was to be based on the use

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\* Latin meaning "*without which not*"

\*\* The T-34 lists as 30 tons, although early production models were 28 tons.

troops landed by gliders, a premise of the launch of paratroopers. Cavallero ensured that the plan and the need for troops and means were being studied by Italian side, with the participation of German experts, including Gen. Student, Commander of the XI *Fliegerkorps*. To date the conversation slipped without contrasts. The discussion was about the time instead to choose for the execution of the project. Cavallero renewed the proposal to give priority to Malta rather than to Tobruk, to the first to show contrast was Kesselring. While he had initially called for the best-loved conquest of Malta with priority one and convinced Hitler and now changed opinion:

"I realized enough of war, needs to understand the insistence of Rommel. Moreover, preparations for an attack on Malta were not yet advanced enough to allow a quick onset of action ...".<sup>(50)</sup>

In fact, the reasoning by which motivated the argument was convincing: the C 3, almost certainly the 8<sup>th</sup> army would move in Libya and the axis air forces heavily committed on Malta, would not have been able to hold its own with the *Royal Air Force* in Africa. On the other hand, attacking and capturing Tobruk would be placed before the 8<sup>th</sup> army in terms of not being able to act throughout the lifetime of the operation against Malta. Keitel and Jodl agreed in full. Cavallero is resigned to allow Rommel's offensive with the aim of capturing Tobruk and reach the border (expected by Rommel: two weeks). Even Mussolini Hitler agreed and concluded that:

"Delay operations in Libya would allow the enemy to reinforce too, while the offensive on Malta, if delayed, would not allow any advantage to your opponent if he continuously kept under pressure. And then do the action in Libya in late May or early June and postpone action on Malta in mid-July (...)"<sup>(51)</sup>.

At this point it seemed that the hesitation of Hitler were really falls and that substantive objections were not met for the German co-operation. Is lawful here a critical remark. Nobody believed impossible in practice to keep Malta in precarious condition in late April for two and a half months, while considering, at that time, that the main objectives of the aerial offense had not been achieved (Kesselring), that the defensive capacity of the island had been only partially impaired (the OKW), that the shortage of fuel oil focused the Italian fleet in the extreme difficulty of blocking, in the long run,

supplies by sea from the British (Cavallero). And despite knowing (all) that a short deadline much of 2<sup>nd</sup> *Luftflotte* would leave the Mediterranean.

Commander Junge, Raeder's representative at the Conference, wrote to a colleague of the *Seekriegsleitung*:

“(…) Overall impression: very satisfying, particularly the atmosphere (the last time, the summer passed, it wasn't really so). We put finally agree on operations in Libya and Malta. Libya first (at the end of May or beginning of June) and Malta (mid-July) (...) Malta: the Führer approves that Germany take on a large scale (...) but, despite this intention, the 2nd Air Fleet should be transferred (...). Kesselring was of the opinion that you can perform such transfer without risk that the British have aerial supremacy. Well, let's see: he should know... “<sup>(52)</sup>.

Really Kesselring, much later, had this to say that the May 10 considered reached the task assigned to the II *Fliegerkorps*: *"It would have been easy-commented-seize the island after the air strikes. Not doing so was a huge failure of the Italian-German Command, that we had to pay later"*<sup>(53)</sup>. In fact, the first ten days of May represented the lowest point in the fortunes of Malta, but, apart from this knowledge in retrospect, do you see what responsibility can be attributed to the Italian high command after the foregoing. The mistake of the Italian Comando Supremo is another: the immense strategic misjudgment for not having studied and prepared the occupation of Malta at *least during the year of non-belligerency*, to accomplish it on 10 June.

Cavallero, therefore, just returned to Rome, he ordered Gen. Vecchiarelli, Commander for the operation C 3, to finalize the preparation by June 20.

### 3. BRITISH OPERATING GUIDELINES

The Defense Committee of the Middle East had approved according operating conception of Auchinleck and on 7 February London signaled the intention to halt enemy pushing at Gazala, or, in the worst case, to the Egyptian border. During the development of a strong defensive position, was organized an offensive powered by Tobruk. However, the approximate date of the beginning of the offensive was not even overshadowed, and the criteria on which was based the preparation of impact force does not



bestowing concrete indications. It was necessary to reach a numerical superiority in tanks of 3 to 2, make changes to the tanks of recent arrival, reduce repair times, have a greater number of workshops, etc. All things that lend themselves to many discussions, as in fact happened.

However, the directives that Auchinleck sent Ritchie the February 11 were clear:

"I intend to resume the offensive in Libya as soon as possible, in order to defeat enemy forces and occupy Cyrenaica and, thereafter, Tripolitania (...)"

The document, laid out in a careful examination of the situation. Rommel could attack and repel the 8<sup>th</sup> army from Ain el-Gazala and Tobruk, ahead of the British move. Now, Tobruk was essential in order to recapture Western Cyrenaica; then the current positions should be held at all costs. In the unfortunate hypothesis that this is not possible and you would make inevitable a retreat, the purpose was to make every effort to defend the fortress, "*but it is not my intention to continue to keep it once the enemy is able to effectively invest it*". Essentially, in the case of general retreat the progression would be stopped on the Sollum -Magdalen- Giara, as set out in directive 110, issued on January 19, <sup>(54)</sup>. The defensive attitude should not be interpreted rigidly. For the *Western Desert Air Force* was desirable for the re-use of airports in Derna-Martuba for obvious reasons; This, however, would involve the achievement and the possession of the Lamluda-Mechili-Bir Tengeder line. Ritchie, therefore, was to study an operation of the kind to do so as soon as circumstances permitted. He placed only two constraints: Tobruk's safety should not be compromised and no one had to take the wear and tear of a series of partial failure, thus harming the larger offensive. Meanwhile, a heavy reliance on the use of mobile columns would have been necessary to prevent the use of landing strips by the enemy.

"Your tasks-concluded Auchinleck-are:

- a. hold the enemy further west of Tobruk, without running the risk of being beaten piecemeal;
- b. organize a action which regain the initiative to destroy the enemy in combat and then occupy the Cyrenaica as soon as possible;

- c. study the possibility of retaking the area airports of Derna-Mechili-Martuba (...);
- d.;
- e. ensure that your forces are invested in Tobruk, in the case of a retreat to the East of the fort;
- f. complete the defensive line accommodation Sollum -Magdalene-Giarabub ASAP (...)" <sup>(55)</sup>.

Annex to the directives was a table of the forces on which Ritchie could presumably count for future offensive:

|                              |                                    |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 13th Corps command           | already available,                 |
| 30th Corps command           | already available,                 |
| 1st Armored Division with:   |                                    |
| an armored car Regiment      | already available,                 |
| 2nd Armored Brigade          | already available,                 |
| 22nd Armored Brigade         | late may,                          |
| 201st Guard Brigade          | already available                  |
| 7th Armored Division with:   |                                    |
| an armored car Regiment      | late February,                     |
| 4th Armored Brigade          | early March                        |
| 7th Motorized Brigade        | mid April                          |
| 10th Armored Division with:  |                                    |
| an armored car Regiment      | end of March,                      |
| 1st Armored Brigade          | mid-April,                         |
| 8th Armored Brigade          | mid-May                            |
| 1st tank Brigade             | already available                  |
| a motorized brigade (ev.)    | is not established with certainty, |
| 3rd Indiana Brigade Mot.     | mid-March                          |
| 4th S.A armored car Regiment | already available,                 |
| 6th S.A armored car Regiment | late April,                        |
| 50th Division                | late February,                     |
| 1st South African Division   | already available,                 |
| 2nd South African Division   | already available                  |
| 1st French Mot. Brigade      | available                          |

In a letter accompanying personnel envisaged the possibility of Auchinleck a misjudgment by Rommel. These had announced to the four winds that put fleeing British forces and made it clear to be preparing a new move against the remnants of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army "*may be a bluff-observed Auchinleck-but he may truly feel that we have been so heavily defeated by not being able to oppose an effective resistance to a*

*further enemy effort (...)*”. In this case, it wasn't irrational hope that misjudgment would lead Rommel to attack with inadequate forces, offering thus to Ritchie an opportunity to take advantage of the surprise <sup>(56)</sup>.

But the February 17-two days after the fall of Singapore –Gen. Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General staff, ordered the Commander in Chief of the Middle East to send the British 70<sup>th</sup> Division and the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian to Ceylon and Burma, and warned that, given the situation in the far East, another division of the 10<sup>th</sup> army would have to return to India.

“(...) The loss of three or four divisions-he wrote-and awareness of receiving more than a Division from the United Kingdom over the next six months, will make your task much more difficult.

I know your plans to retake Cyrenaica should perhaps be abandoned in favor of the defense of the Egyptian border (...). The undermining of the Middle East does not mean that we minimize the potential threat on your Western and Northern fronts during 1942. It comes to strengthen areas where we are most immediately threatened (...)” <sup>(57)</sup>.

At that time, the Governor of Malta signaled to the Chief of the General Staff of the disastrous conditions under which he experience and asked that an initiative in Cyrenaica relieve Axis pressure on the island. The interdependence between Malta and the Libyan arena was apparent, and London was quickly in the determination to accelerate the resumption of action in Africa to allow oxygen to Malta. This convinced the decision complicated relations between Churchill and Auchinleck and led soon a bitter friction. On 26 February, the *Prime Minister*, who is not come to terms with as the army in the Middle East, "*who had now reached the strength of 630,000 men and continually received reinforcements, were to sit idle for so long, thus measuring the burden our budget*" <sup>(58)</sup>, pose an explicit question to Auchinleck:

“I have not much bothered critics these days, but now we must ask what are your intentions. Based on the data that we have, you have a considerable superiority in terms of aircraft, armored vehicles and other material in relation to the enemy. It seems that there is a danger that the latter could receive reinforcements at the same speed or even faster. The supply of Malta is cause for us to growing concerns; everyone can then realize the grandeur of our losses in the Far East.

Please let me know something. Best regards” <sup>(59)</sup>.

Auchinleck “*followed suit in a 1,500-Word document*”, in the words of Churchill, the reasons that compelled not to hurry. Circumstances

that the positions from Gazala to Bir Hakeim allowed wide safety and covered superbly Tobruk, according to the resumption of the initiative, it penetrated in a comparative examination of the opposing forces and possibilities, and ending with the statement that only since June 10 would have been reached a reasonable superiority and that, therefore, a move before that date seemed unreasonable and dangerous to the whole Egypt. Then recapped four points his intentions: continue to bring heavy armor; strengthen the advanced positions (Gazala – Bir Hakeim – Tobruk) and rearward (Sollum -Maddalena) and make the rail terminus until el-Adem; amass in the Tobruk area sufficient stock for the offensive; seize the first opportunity for an operation intended to reoccupy the airfields of Derna-Mechili, provided without prejudice to the integrity of major effort intended to retake Cyrenaica and without jeopardizing the possession of Tobruk.

The long letter from Auchinleck was examined carefully by the chiefs of staff and all were of the opinion that it cannot accept an inertia that would be extended until July. The supply of Malta from Gibraltar had become prohibitive and that Alexandria was linked to advanced in Cyrenaica. On the other hand, it was a major crisis for Malta in early May, when at least one convoy had come. Above all, do not justify the fact that the axis managed to recover after a reverse, while the Middle East command encountered difficulty. Churchill, then, was furious:

“Another ugly Monday noted Brooke in his diary, on March-2 (...) the Prime Minister has compiled a telegram to Auchinleck that the covers of reprimands for not having decided to attack soon. Despite not being able to know all aspects of the situation (...) he tries to force him to attack before the appropriate time and, what is worse, tries to reach the goal with an offensive message. Thank goodness we managed to stop it and to review the text” <sup>(60)</sup>.

Among the phrases taken from Brooke included expressions such as “*the armies are not created for star without doing nothing 'and' the soldiers are made to fight*”: Churchill was not to weigh very words. Ultimately, the dispatch "purged" reiterated the absolute need to reach Malta at least a convoy during March-April and noted that the appreciation of the factual situation in Cairo was probably spoiled by an over-valuation of the availability of tanks by the Italian-German. According to the Chief of staff, an offensive against Rommel in the weeks following it was "imperative", not only for the salvation of Malta,

but also if the Axis was less in resources. Without telling, it was feared that in the Commander in Chief of the Middle East took a defensive-minded stand.

The fact was that there were also problems of people. On 21 February, Brooke had returned, at the urging of Churchill, on the proposal for a change of Chief of staff, Gen. Dorman-Smith, advanced since February 6. The task, he added, could be entrusted to Ritchie or Gen. Galloway, and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, for example, to Gen. Beresford-Peirse. As far as concerned Dorman-Smith there was not many difficulties. Although absolutely happy with his work, Auchinleck agreed on the desirability of a turnover, but in his place was demanding Gen. Corbett, Commander of the Indian 4<sup>th</sup> Corps in Iraq. *"I don't want to remove Ritchie from 8th Army-explain-under the present circumstances. He took in hand the situation, knows what to do and has the ability to do it, I think. Beresford-Peirse doesn't have the stature of a commander of the army and has decided limitations (...)"*.<sup>(61)</sup> But Auchinleck did not know the outcome of the mission entrusted by him to Dorman-Smith.

The 16<sup>th</sup> had sent to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army officially to monitor the General Staff's technique in controls, but actually to form a clear idea of the atmosphere. Dorman-Smith remained for several days between the divisions and derived from his lap a little consoling framework; in other words: *"a general discontent among the upper ranks to Ritchie's conduct and a way of dealing with the Organization and sloppy and amateur technique"*. Back in Cairo, was able to speak to Godwin-Austen and discover the secrets behind the resignation request. Then showed up to report. Auchinleck invited him for lunch for two on the shores of Lake Fayum, to treat the topic in absolute freedom. An account of Dorman-Smith was very explicit, as it was his judgment: Ritchie, in his opinion, he had *"a mind not agile enough nor imagination to a command such as"* and proposed exemption, by invoking it in Cairo as Vice Chief of staff. Auchinleck, who did not expect such a lackluster, was greatly shaken, but found themselves with their hands tied: *"I have already got rid of a Corps Commander. Getting rid of another in the space of three months may affect morale"*<sup>(62)</sup>. And Ritchie remained. Another important change was that of head of information unit, the much criticized (in London) for his optimism, Gen. Shearer, whose place was taken by Col. de Guingand. The arrival of Gen. Corbett (March 30), Dorman-Smith remained as Vice Chief of staff.

There was to respond to Brooke, and Auchinleck had him with meticulousness controversy, referring to an earlier dispatch, with whom he had been urged to try to take the landing strips of Cyrenaica in Western further period of full moon, to cooperate to the happy arrival of a convoy to Malta: “(...) *In para. 2 your message of February 27 is absolutely free and implies that I and my officers are incompetent. For your information, the facts are these, (...)*”. The “facts” were formed by the situation of the tanks. In January, the Middle East had received 126 tanks: 48 Grant, 76 Stuart, 2 Crusader, no Matilda and no Valentine. Those in need of repair means were 528, of which 273 already in the workshop; overall, therefore, the existing tanks, efficient or not, amounted to 1,315. “*You know-continued-that many other factors (...) affect the preparation of the unit for the battle and I will be grateful if you will explain to the Chief of staff and the Defense Minister*”<sup>(63)</sup>. This personal response followed the official note of commanders in Chief: from the point of view of the naval and air there was nothing to gain and much to lose by waiting; but the battle in question was essentially land and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was not ready. A premature offensive, to save Malta, could lead to the destruction of the armored unit in course of preparation and, therefore, put at risk the security of Egypt and the Middle East. Was it worth it?

It was inevitable the determined a strong tension. The chiefs of staff are clashing and Churchill found their assent to convene immediately Auchinleck in London to provide clarifications, particularly in terms of armored vehicles. The applicant replied sharply that in these circumstances he felt to leave the Middle East. The strategic situation was so fluid and susceptible to rapid changes, which he could not delegate his responsibility to anyone. On the other hand, had provided all the information necessary to illustrate the availability and his trip to London would certainly not made possible the advance of the offensive. If deemed useless, would send in his stead the operations Bureau Chief to explain particular aspects. Then, a few days later, he advanced the idea that Brooke and, possibly, even Marshal of the Air Transport, Chief of staff of the air force, were themselves in Cairo or in Baghdad for a Conference, which would have been appropriate for Wavell, the Commander-in-Chief of India.

The refusal of Auchinleck and his suggestions are seen rather negatively by heads of staff and formed the subject of

communication by Churchill. *“However, he rang me from Chequers-noted Brooke-and I had to talk personally with him of the thing. He was on a rampage, and again proposed to remove Auchinleck from command”* <sup>(64)</sup>.

Despite the braking action by Brooke, who since March 9 had become the President of the Council of Chiefs of staff, Churchill was not the kind you don't want to weigh their irritation and sent to Cairo two dispatches, a more rugged than the other. The March 15 telegraphed:

“Your report of 27 February continues to cause here at the centre of concerns for both the chiefs of staff and the Defense Committee. I regret therefore that can't come home for consultations. The reference that you think will put in danger the security of Malta; It is also not at all sure that the enemy cannot get reinforcements faster than us, so that after long-awaited you will be in a situation to down the same, or even worse. Your losses were far lower than those of the enemy, which nevertheless continues to fight; for example, the 7th Armored Division was withdrawn to the Delta area to regroup, although its losses were smaller than those of the German 15th and 21st Division, which will pursue with great energy. Wait shortly and a violent German counter-offensive on the Russian front; you will feel so intolerable that 635,000 people (not counting those of Malta) by virtue of your dependencies should remain unspent for prepare for another big battle for the month of July.

A limited offensive against Derna, for which leave some hope, would also have the advantage to engage the enemy, forcing him to consume human lives, ammunition, tanks and aircraft. In this case, if your armored forces are defeated, you set aside in your defensive zone. If you defeat enemy armored forces, nobody here at the center can understand unless you take advantage of the success, and later (...).

I did everything possible to provide assistance throughout the war continue, though dear price. It would be for me the cause for deep regret that pain the mutual agreement has failed. To avoid any misunderstanding, I asked Sir Stafford Cripps to stand for one day in Cairo around 19 or 20 of this month, during his trip to India, and to submit the views of the War Cabinet. Will be with him General Nye who travels to Cairo for his own account and is perfectly aware of the opinion of the Chief of staff. For the moment the Chief of I. G. S.\* service cannot leave England” <sup>(65)</sup>.

Not satisfied, the 17<sup>th</sup> following:

“To my message of March 15, I should add the following consideration. If, as a result of all our discussions, you may decide you need to stay on the defensive until July, it will be necessary to take immediately into account the transfer of at least 15 Air Squadrons [ie: groups] from Libya to the Caucasus, to support the Russian left wing” <sup>(66)</sup>.

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\*Chief of the Imperial General Staff

Cripps sent his report on March 21. Said to be "*very satisfied with the atmosphere that reigns in Cairo after our talks*" and tried to pour water on the fire: maybe Auchinleck had exaggerated the uncertainties of the situation, but I was determined to overcome the difficulties. Needed tranquility and ... of "*a short friendly telegram to assure you that you will receive all the aid necessary to hit the goal at the time established*"<sup>(67)</sup>. The report also contained a very important element, given that, according to Auchinleck, would have marked the beginning of the long-awaited offensive: mid-May. It followed a long note about technical details worked out separately by Gen. Nye, Vice Chief of the Imperial General staff, who had led with them "*a formidable list of issues related to almost everything, from the armored forces to potential average age of their commanders*".<sup>(68)</sup> As the outcome of the mission was satisfied with Churchill, one can deduce from the message that on March 22 addressed to Nye, still in Cairo:

"I heard from the Lord Privy Seal. I'm surprised at all that everything goes so smoothly; It seems that you have approved everything that was said, and we all come to accept the inactivity of the army and the probability of losing Malta, while the Russians are resisting desperate to the German counteroffensive and while the enemy is receiving reinforcements in Libya more rapidly than us.

Do not hurry to return, but go deeper into the issues of efficiency and of armament of tanks, and the use of labor in the Middle East (...) <sup>(69)</sup>.

The 24<sup>th</sup> Brooke noted in his diary: "is this really exhausting having to constantly protect Auchinleck!". Churchill was increasingly furious: he had decided to replace Auchinleck with Mar. Gort, Governor of Gibraltar (on 7 May will instead be sent to Malta to replace the exhausted Gen. Dobbie), with Nye, with Gen. Alexander, Commander of British troops in Burma, or invoke Wavell from India, but Brooke persuaded him to postpone and to be patient. "*It wasn't easy-he then warned Auchinleck-convince the Prime Minister and the Defense Committee of the need for an extension and I am sure that any further reference would not be accepted without overwhelming your reasons*"<sup>(70)</sup>. However, the Imperial General staff there were those who doubted the real intention of Auchinleck to give battle: *reading between the lines of the telegrams of Auchinleck-commented on 7 April with Gen. Kennedy, Chief Operations Division-I don't think it will, at least in May*"<sup>(71)</sup>. He was a good Prophet.

Auchinleck knew about having to face a simple problem not psychological. He did so with a sense of humor.



On 30 March addressed to major commanders and service chiefs a letter that only will fall into German hands until the end of July:

"There is a grave danger that our friend Rommel become a bogeyman for British troops and only as long as you talk a lot about him.

As energetic and capable, Rommel is not a Superman, and admitted that it would be really unfortunate if our soldiers give him supernatural abilities.

I urge you to intervene with all means available to debunk this myth. Rommel is nothing more than an ordinary German General, and also rather awkward, as we could learn by word of mouth from his officers. First and foremost, we must carefully avoid nominating him, when you want to indicate enemy forces in Libya. You can refer to the Germans, the Axis powers, the enemy, but never mention Rommel.

Please make sure that my order is executed and that all the commanders and chiefs of staff are convinced of what I ordered.

C.J. Auchinleck

P.S. Personally I am not jealous of Rommel".

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The Anglo-American strategic direction outlined in the Arcadia Conference was defensive in the Pacific and the offensive across the Atlantic, in the assumption that the Japanese were kept away from vital areas such as the Bay of Bengal, and losses of ships were contained. The need to urgently tackle the rampant Japanese advanced and strong shipping losses in American waters at the hands of U-Boote, led to abandoning the operation *Super Gymnast*. The new plan was prepared by Gen. Marshall, Army Chief of staff and Chairman of Chiefs of staff meeting, envisaged sending to Britain of two or three armored divisions later this summer. In the spring of 1943 was programmed the influx of 400,000 other men; However, if the conditions of the USSR had appeared very serious you could try to set foot in France already in the summer of 1942 (operation *Sledgehammer*). The beachhead so created would be kept through the winter 1942-43, until the invasion in style (operation *Round-up*). It is know that the British thought it was too far from sharing such an idea: the shortage of transport ships and landing craft excluded that not only the 1942, but even the 1943 could offer possibility of implementation. And as for the German resistance, where it was first seriously weakened, an invasion of France would have had little chance of success.

During the entire month of April all the attention of Churchill and his staff focused on two topics (excluding Malta): landing across English Channel proposed by Marshall for next September and the appearance of the Japanese fleet in the Indian Ocean. The opening of the Western front, which inclined also Churchill who would attack everywhere <sup>(72)</sup>, was viewed with extreme skepticism by Brooke: “(...) *all the strength that [the USA] can carry for that time-noted in the diary April 9-is only two and a half divisions. Not a great deal, actually. It also doesn't have the slightest idea of the complexities that their plan involves (...)*” <sup>(73)</sup>. However on 14 April a meeting took place between the main subject British and American envoys, which was accepted, in principle, to carry out the invasion “*probably in 1942, certainly in 1943*” <sup>(74)</sup>. If Churchill and Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's personal representative, were convinced that they had reached full agreement, Marshall did not let deceive, be provided that Brooke had made a clear understanding known as the Indian Ocean's defense was ranked first, it provided the British chiefs of staff were limited, with intention to take into account the possibility to disembark in France in 1942 or 1943 to the express condition that the circumstances appear favorable to guarantee both the success. “*Marshall (...) -Brooke commented-is becoming popular at all the military restless to a policy of attack. But, and this is really a great evil, his plan does not go beyond the landing on the coast. If not then you should play baccarat or chemin-de-fer to Le Touquet is not established. This afternoon I asked: “After landed where we go West, South or East?”* There still had to be conceived” <sup>(75)</sup>.

So it was that, at least for the month of April, Auchinleck would wait calmly to his preparations. On 21 March he had compiled for Ritchie a note on the offensive in Libya, highlighting some of the concepts, now virtually discounted: first goal was the conquest of Western Cyrenaica; to achieve this it was necessary to first destroy the enemy army and then hold the area of el Agheila with enough troops; the offensive was to be begun as soon as possible, but that there was a reasonable chance of success was necessary a superiority in tanks of 50%; a limited offensive to achieve the airfields of Derna-Martuba entailed also a superiority in tanks of 50% and was to be seen only if feasible before that in grand style <sup>(76)</sup>.

Comparative estimates by the Commander in Chief gave these items:

On April 1<sup>st</sup>:

best case            300 *cruisers* against 350 Axis tanks

worst case        300 *cruisers* against 500 Axis tanks

On May 15<sup>th</sup>,        450 *cruisers* against 650 Axis tanks

On June 1<sup>st</sup>        600 *cruisers* against 650 Axis tanks

The British were excluding 150 *Matilda* and *Valentines*, as just not sufficiently maneuverable. After much discussion it was agreed on the absolute need to prevent that Rommel could escape into Tripolitania. He had to be prompted to attack where most convenient for the British, rather than vice versa. The move of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army's, South of the Italian-German positions in order to compel the enemy to fight away from supply, organs aimed at Benghazi. There were no problems for reputed infantry forces required; the difficulties were, instead, for those loving armor, have a superiority of 3 to 2, and start with 50% of vehicles in reserve. Of course, if the opponent had received more tanks than expected, there was a risk that he attacked before the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had gathered the bulk of the *cruisers* required.

A second note of Auchinleck on 20 April drew a plan summary. First three actions were covered by preliminary: a deception against Tmimi (formerly took place on 21-22 March), one against Bir Tengeder and third against the Bir Temrad-Tmimi. The operation itself was divided into four phases.

Step (A): attack on the Bir Temrad -Gasr el Ambar sector with a Inf. Div. reinforced by the tanks, in order to pin down the opponent on his positions and divert attention from the next step.

Step (B): establishment of two or three 'defended' areas at the level of Brigade, by another Inf. Div., also reinforced by the tanks, with a slight offset from the previous step, in order to realize switching pins for the intervention of armored units. If the enemy had produced his effort during phase B, things would not be changed. Of course the British Armored units would have, from the outset, assuming a location that counterattack in favorable conditions.

Step (C): completion of Step B with a third Inf. Div., always reinforced by the tanks, to ensure a strong base near Bir Ben Gania, Trigh el Abd.

Step (D): influx of reserves and supplies to Bir Ben Gania to allow a force of impact turning on Benghazi or toward Antelat-Saunnu area or if suggested by the events, on el-Mechili.

On balance, needed: a Inf. Div. and a tank Bd. to the North; a Inf. Div. with a tank battalion to protect the supply line; a Inf. Div. with a Inf. Bd. and I tank battalion to keep the Ain el Gazala – Bir Hakeim – Tobruk; a detachment of infantry and armored cars at Giarabub; a motorized Inf. Bd. protection of advanced aviation fields; two or three Arm. Div. and a Inf. Div. at the point of impact. Total: 4 infantry divisions, 2 infantry brigades, one motorized and 2-3 armored divisions<sup>(77)</sup>. This calculation is done by Auchinleck.

But at this point, a bomb erupted. On April 23 the chiefs of staff sent to all Commanders in Chief overseas an appreciation of the overall situation from which was the possibility that the victorious Japanese progression continuing quickly westward, India came to be in grave danger and maritime communications, as well as the same security in the Middle East, threatened. Auchinleck discussed the document to the Defence Committee of the Middle East: "*this seems to me-we made-requires a comprehensive review of our current strategic orientation*". And began to list a series of negative factors of the theatre of operations: naval forces so weak from deemed highly doubt they were able to stop the impending enemy naval supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean; the air forces in terms of not being able to ensure superiority over Northern and Western fronts, where they became active at the same time, nor to oppose successfully to a serious attack axis aviation against the Egyptian bases; the issues possibilities really to save Malta and, consequently, to prevent an influx of reinforcements to the German-Italian army in Libya; ground forces still too incomplete to parry a powerful effort against Syria or Iraq and at the same time keep a Cyrenaican front against Rommel's attack; the inevitable that the Middle East would have to count on those who had, since each availability would have been launched in India. "This situation show," said Auchinleck-can be considered to be pessimistic, but it is real and we have to cope and, after a long dissertation on various assumptions about the entire theater, was to the point:

"I am forced, therefore, to conclude with extreme reluctance in these critical circumstances that we cannot afford to launch an offensive in Libya, but on the contrary we must concentrate all our efforts to increase the defensive features in the entire Middle East, and at the same time give the resources we can do without the benefit of India (...)"<sup>(78)</sup>.

Then submitted to the Committee a draft telegram to the Chief of staff, as said summary. The draft was not adopted and on 3 May was sent another text, but with the same conclusions. To complement the dispatch, Auchinleck sent Brooke a long letter of explanation, though not imagined even the sensation that the telegram was aroused. Churchill was furious. The first thing he did was to demand his immediate replacement with Alexander. Brooke managed to calm him down with great difficulty, despite agreeing in judging the findings of inappropriate assessment made in Cairo. Malta's position had worsened and the ongoing measures to defend Ceylon and India seemed to be sufficient, so the start of an offensive in Libya was even more desired.

Churchill was stopped and responded to Auchinleck *"thanking for the donation to weaken further in the Middle East to meet the Indian threat,"* stressing that the greatest contribution that he could give to the war as a whole was to beat the enemy in Cyrenaica, and trusting that the directives sent from London would have *"total execution for the date that you mentioned"* to Sir Stafford Cripps <sup>(79)</sup>.

Was becoming a dialogue between the deaf. On May 6, when the copy arrived in Cairo, Churchill exploded again and once again asked the head of Auchinleck. These arguments, in fact, could not succeed like: the latest confrontation between the opposing armored forces made unjustifiable the offensive before mid-June. Starting in advance there was a big risk of wear in partial successes and meet such a serious final backhand because of the unfavorable ratio of tanks.

Brooke himself was unhappy with a discourse based solely on the number of "tanks" and that did not take account of the strategic situation. However on 8 May, afternoon meeting of the war Cabinet, claimed to not deemed appropriate to order to Auchinleck to move on May 15 against his opinion. Rather, they could give time until 15 June, inviting him to coordinate the operation by sending convoys to Malta and to be ready to take advantage of a possible offensive by Rommel.

This hypothesis, in fact, was slowly making way. Until mid-April the authorities in London, although aware and concerned about the pace with which the increased supplies to Libya, had not thought that Rommel could become so hard to resume the initiative so soon. Some news was caught by intercepted diplomatic documents about a great Italian-German operation from

Libya and from the Caucasus, but also that the USSR had been destroyed and Malta occupied. In addition, on March 10 the Ultra deciphering machine 'translated' a German dispatch encrypted with the quintessential Enigma with whom the *Fliegerfuhrer* ordered to photograph the Tobruk fortifications and informed that the Commander of *Panzerarmee* wondered about all the fortifications, the anti-tank positions, installations of water deposits that exist between the border and the Suez Canal. However, it was not yet conclusive information as blocks.

It was in the second half of April that British military intelligence in London persuaded, by studying the reports from Cairo, situation that Rommel was preparing an offensive that could also launch sooner than you could imagine. The hypothesis was followed with the greatest attention by exploiting the decryption of Enigma messages. The April 24 was known a comment by Kesselring about British failure-related American military attaché in Cairo to Rome-to resume the advance on Benghazi before the beginning of June: "*since this is not possible before June-Kesselring said-after it's too late*"; on 25 April, she learned that a German Parachute Brigade would be ready by the end of May for "*operations against the British army and the attack on Tobruk*"; on 22 April had been caught the news that *the Afrikakorps* would receive 80 *Panzer* by May; on 30 April it was known the list of requested supplies from *Panzerarmee* with their respective priorities and specifying that they arrived in Cyrenaica before the end of May.

This could also indicate an operation against Malta, but that just refers to the Libyan-Egyptian scenario was soon revealed by the news of the withdrawal of units of the *Luftwaffe* from Sicily. Remained some doubt on the extent of the supplies stockpiled by the Italian-German army, however on 2 May even this uncertainty was removed. You knew that the fuel consumption units of the *Panzerarmee* was increased substantially since June. The British intelligence service it was the conclusion that the Germans were expecting other armored vehicles and rotated and enough fuel for them and, on balance, estimated that Rommel had enough petrol for 38 days of operations. Since then followed the confirmations. On 8 May had accepted the prediction that the attack against Tobruk probably would have taken place in the third week of May and that an advance towards the Delta would have been impossible during the summer due to the limited availability of gasoline remained at Rommel after the middle of June <sup>(80)</sup>.

Churchill then, based on all this, personally wrote a letter to Auchinleck:

“(…) We are unanimous in believing that, despite the risks that you mentioned, it would be good that attacking the enemy and engaged in a battle of great proportions, if you can during the month of May and much better if before. We are ready to assume full responsibility for these general statements, leaving you the necessary freedom for their execution. In doing this, you will certainly appreciate that it may be that the enemy is thinking of it as well to attack in the first days of June”<sup>(81)</sup>.

But the Defense Committee of the Middle East would not yet give in and replies that the eventual fall of Malta would not necessarily affect the security of Egypt, provided that the supplies across the Indian Ocean had not been interrupted. On the other hand, was to discuss whether the recapture of Cyrenaica would return to Malta its offensive power, after the terrible air strikes conceded. Apart from that, throwing troops against the axis with inadequate armored forces could result in the almost complete destruction of the latter and without them Egypt could not be guaranteed:

“We believe again-the dispatch concluded that the risk for Egypt, the piecemeal destruction of our armored forces that can result from premature offensive, may be more serious and more immediate than that resulting from the possible loss of Malta, no matter how serious this is”<sup>(82)</sup>.

Furthermore, the Committee recognized the existence of evidence that they consider possible opponent to attack a strong defensive positions of Gazala: well, in that case was not to exclude the mass of the Italian-German armor that will allow British tank units a decisive counterattack.

Faced with similar stance the chiefs of staff were convinced that the strategic vision of Cairo was not the most correct. They decided, however, to grant an extension so that you can play the card of counterattack surprise if Rommel had anticipated his own attempt to take Tobruk. The departure of the convoy to Malta scheduled for June was to mark, however, the deadline. On May 10 Churchill sent a not too veiled *ultimatum*.

“1. The chiefs of staff, the Defense Committee and the war Cabinet reviewed the whole situation again. We are resolved to prevent Malta from falling without first all your army has fought strenuously for his defense (...). Its possession would offer to the enemy a bridge

clear and secure for communication with Africa, with all the consequences arising there from. His loss would break the route by which the Middle East, because India must depend for much of their air reinforcements. In addition, it would compromise any offensive against Italy and plans for future operations, such as *Acrobat* and *Gymnast*. A comparison of these disasters, we consider the risks that you may face for the significantly lower Egypt's security, and therefore we accept them.

2. We insist on the point of view therefore already shows, with this specification: the earliest date that we can accept to engage the enemy must be such as to facilitate the passage of convoy planned for moonless period of June (...)”<sup>(83)</sup>.

It was the choice between execution of the order, or the resignation. He spent a week of silence and Churchill, who chomps on the bit, on 17 May, solicited a clarification. Two days later, Auchinleck sent the reply:

“1. I intend to execute the statements contained in para. 2 your message of May 10.

2. I assume that your telegram forbid asking only a diversionary action intended to promote the Malta convoy, but that the main objective of an offensive in Libya continue to be the destruction of enemy forces and the occupation of Cyrenaica as prerequisite for the final elimination of the enemy from Libya. If my interpretation is wrong, I should be informed immediately, since the plans for an offensive of large proportions are quite different from those intended simply to create a diversionary operation. I keep on the assumption that my guess is correct.

3. (...) the timing for the start of the offensive will be dominated by three considerations: first, the departure of the convoy; Second, the enemy's activities from now until then; third, the relationship of air forces between the enemy and ourselves. All these items are now subject to my headquarters, by careful and continuous examination.

4. There are many signs that the enemy wants to attack us in the near future. If he attacks, our future action must be determined by the results of the battle and cannot be predicted at this time.

5. Assuming that the enemy attacks first, it is my intention that General Ritchie unleashed the offensive in Libya at the time that best accords with the intention of distracting the enemy forces Max to help Malta convoy and that at the same time ensuring the highest degree of readiness by the forces employed in the attack (...)”.

Auchinleck added that reserved the right to determine the “*extent of compromise*” between the two contradictory requirements and that, given the small margin of superiority in terms of aircraft and land vehicles, success could not be considered safe and, however, would neither be quick nor spectacular. Therefore demanded that no advertisement surround the operation, if not after its inception<sup>(84)</sup>.

In London there was a substantial peace of mind: while giving discounted now



Rommel's offensive, he considered that these with available resources, could hope to repel the 8<sup>th</sup> Army to the Egyptian border and nothing more. As a result, the *Prime Minister* assured immediately about the accuracy of the interpretation given to his dispatch: it was time for a showdown. While realizing, of course, that victory could not be guaranteed, confidence in Auchinleck and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army remained intact, but ... "*Personally I would be more confident if you took direct control, as you have already done at Sidi Rezegh. On this point, however, I do not intend to press upon you in any way*" <sup>(85)</sup>. Things were not going well at all at the beginning of *Crusader*: Churchill tried to be convincing. Obviously Auchinleck refused:

“(...) Although strongly desires take command in person in Libya, I believe that this is not appropriate. I looked at the possibilities with great care and I concluded that it would be difficult for me to maintain a proper sense of proportion if I was swamped by tactical problems on the Libyan front. I think that can happen almost any time a situation where I have to decide if I can continue to strengthen and nourish the 8th Army without serious obstacles or if you would rather not have to constitute reserves in the backline and consider the strengthening of our northern front, I'm now weakening General Ritchie to provide any help possible. If in doubt, I believe that my place is here. I hope however that you can rely on my ability to adapt to the situation and grasp the rudder if necessary. I keep myself in tight relations with General Ritchie and therefore are always aware of the situation. I hope that everything goes well (...)” <sup>(86)</sup>.

It was only after the defeat of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army which Churchill acknowledged the excessive extension of the theatre of operations in the Middle East and too many needs of his theatres:

“I don't think-write from Cairo to the Deputy *Prime Minister*-that we would go out to the many disasters in the Western Desert if General Auchinleck had not been distracted by contradictory concerns of overly extended front (...)” <sup>(87)</sup>.

Starting from 22 May no longer had doubts that the Italian-German offensive would begin within a few days. *Ultra* had revealed two Kesselring's communications: the convening of major aviation commanders at Derna for the next morning and order that the *Luftwaffe* units were ready for the 24<sup>th</sup>. Also decrypted was the news that Gen. Crüwell would be returning to Cyrenaica the 24<sup>th</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup>.

On May 25 *Ultra* allowed London to 'read' three German dispatches

from which one could infer that the beginning of Rommel's offensive was now a matter of hours. Only one of them could be sent to the headquarters of the Middle East, but it was enough, even if the afternoon of the 26<sup>th</sup>, around 18:00, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army's interception service intercepted the *Venice* order and interpreted correctly as the agreed signal for the operation.  
(88)

Churchill's final comment was typical. He remembered the story of the man who wanted to give the bear and purge that prepared with any precision the powder, he was going to blow with a funnel into the throat of the animal. *But the bear breathed first* (89).

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

- 1 C. FAVAGROSSA, op. cited, p. 170.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 275, prom. 11637/S.P. 29.3.1942 date.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 171. February 6 then Mar. Keitel had indicated the timing of gathered: an Army Corps with three divisions since may, the Army Command and another Army Corps from June. In the first ten days of April the R Army Staff established the organic formation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army.
- 4 *Taurinense* Alp. Div, *Littorio* Arm.Div., *Pistoia* Mot Div., *Piave* Mot. Div., *Livorno* Inf. Div., *Granatieri di Sardegna* Inf. Div.
- 5 G. CYAN, op. cited above, p. 590.
- 6 From the minutes of the meeting held on 6.3.1942.
- 7 The staff of Div.Inf. A.S. 42 type had been established by the Comando Superiore: two infantry regiments with three battalions, a regiment artillery on five groups, a mixed engineer battalion, a health and a sanitation section. Altogether: 7,000 troops, 400 vehicles, 150 motorcycles, 146 submachine guns, 96 machineguns, 72 A/T Rifles, 72 47/32 pieces, 18 mortars from 81, 60 artillery pieces and 20 by 20 mm. guns.
- 8 The organic type Corps A.S. 42 included: two or three Inf. Div, a two battalions bersaglieri Regiment, an artillery regiment on three groups from 105/28, a pioneer battalion, a links battalion, a mixed truck unit, a core service.
- 9 GIUSEPPE MANCINELU, *Dal fronte dell'Africa Settentrionale*, Rizzoli, Milano 1970, p. 48. with them. Mancinelli had assumed the position on 8 March, in lieu of Col. Piacenza that had temporarily replaced Gen. Calvi di Bergolo, returned to Italy on February 7 to take command of the Arm. Div.*Centauro*.
- 10 Report of Gen. Armando F. 40/R given command 22.4.1943 General National Union Anti-aircraft Protection.
- 11 Cavallero Diary on 2 and 6 March and April 9, 1942. In addition, according to an entry in Libya and in Rome, a day in the canteen Gambarà would say that he hoped to live until the day when he could command an army against the Germans. The voice is reported by Ciano (op. cited, p. 598) and Rommel (LIDDELL HART, op. cited, p. 187).
- 12 Cavallero added that Italian legislation, moreover, admitted similar cases. In Ethiopia, himself, General of Army Corps, top commander of the armed forces of the Empire, had employed a Corps General designated Corps, Commander of the Government troops AOI
- 13 DSCS, f. 01/3868 op. date 5.3.1942 of the Comando Superiore.
- 14 G. MANCINELU, op. cited above, p. 17.
- 15 DSCS, tele 30419/Op. date 23.3.1942- Annex No. 4.
- 16 "The new Chief of G.S. of the *Comando Superiore* came to see us yesterday-wrote Rommel to his wife on 26 February-Gambarà returned to Italy to take a command; in other words, is in disgrace. The new one has made a good impression "(LIDDELL HART, op. cited, p. 186).
- 17 DSCSAS, f. 17/42 secret of *Panzerarmee* date 24.3.1942- Annex No. 5.
- 18 DSCSAS, f. 01/4863 Op. date 28.3.1942- Annex No. 6.
- 19 DSCS, tele 30460/Op. date 31.3.1942, at 21.40.
- 20 DSCSAS, tele 01/5018 Op. date 1.4.1942, at 10.35-Annex No. 7.
- 21 DSCSAS, tele 01/5105 Op. date 1.4.1942, at 23.25-Annex No. 8.
- 22 DSCSAS, tele 30466/Op. date 1.4.1942, hour 21.30 Supreme command-annex n. 9.
- 23 In March the Burckhardt Group was repatriated. In its place came the 288<sup>th</sup> Special Unit.
- 24 DSCS, tele 30504/Op. date 6.4.1942, at 20.24.
- 25 DSCSAS, tele 1778 date 8.4.1942, 11.30 hours, of Mancinelli.

- 26 DSCSAS, tele 01/5680 Op. date 10.4.1942, at 22.40. The move set off wide out the suffering of infantry divisions in terms of transportation. But we must say that there were serious deficiencies in organization and operation in the logistics field. As an example we can cite the case of *Brescia*. For the movement had also reinforced an truck section of 24 light trucks. The unit was in such deplorable conditions that 19 mechanical vehicles, after their arrival broke down, were no longer able to move. The command of the Division immediately signaled the inconvenience, even if it was free, garage, could not provide for repairs. Well, not just failed to get top intervention to shed inefficient transportation, but "the Division will arrive at el Alamein and held again to Tmimi these vehicles 19, always waiting for it happen several times received a promise of withdrawal of trucks by the competent bodies (report by Gen. Lombardi).
- 27 DSCSAS, f. 01/5708 Op. date 11.4.1942- Annex No. 10.
- 28 DSCSAS, s.n. date 12.4.1942- letter Annex No. 11
- 29 DSCA, memorandum No. 103 of Supermarina date 18.6.1941. For a wider and exhaustive examination of the topic, refer essentially to MARIANO Gabriel, *Operazione C 3: Malta* Ufficio storico, staff of the Navy (USSMM), Rome 1965. V ds. even ALBERT SANTONI and FRANCESCO MATTESINI, *La partecipazione tedesca alla guerra aeronavale nel Mediterraneo*, ed. of Athens and Gonzo, Rome 1980; KURT ASSMANN, *Anni fatali per la Germania*, USSMM, Roma 1953; EMILIO F ALDELLA, *The Italy in World War II*, Cappelli, Bologna, 1959.
- 30 M. GABRIELE, op. cited above, pp. IV.
- 31 *ibid.* app. V.
- 32 A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 102.
- 33 G. SANTORO, *The Italian air force in the second world war*, vol. II, ed. Rome 1957, Esse, p. 263.
- 34 reported by M. Gabriel, op. cited above, pp. 135-136.
- 35 A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 102.
- 36 K. ASSMANN, op. cited above, p. 265.
- 37 M. GABRIELE, op. cited above, p. 153.
- 38 Cavallero Diary, date March 17 and summary talk.
- 39 *ibid.*, date March 21.
- 40 For the second battle of *Sirte* see. ANGELO JACHINO, *Le due Sirti*, Mondadori, Milan 1953; GIUSEPPE FIORAVANZO, *war in the Mediterranean*, vol. II, book 2: The Naval actions from 1.1.1941 to 8.9.1943, USSMM, Rome 1960, pp. 152-220; ANDREW CUNNINGHAM, *A sailor's Odyssey*, Garzanti, Milan, 1952, pp. 342-353. I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, pp. 163-172.
- 41 ANTHONY MARTIENSSEN, *Hitler and his admirals*, Garzanti, Milan 1950.
- 42 Cavallero Diary, date 11 April.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 M. Gabriel, p. 174, note 14,
- 45 Cavallero Diary, date 21 April.
- 46 ENNO VON RINTELEN, *Mussolini, l'alleato*, Corso, Roma 1952, p. 156.
- 47 In Malta were the 7th light A/A artillery brigade with 144 pieces and the 10th heavy artillery brigade with 30 pieces in reinforced concrete. The munitions were being rationed but in safe, were held for 100 reserves guns by the time of the invasion.
- 48 reported by G. SANTORO, op. cited above, p. 271, note 1.
- 49 Cavallero Diary, summary of the meeting AT Berghof on 30.4.1942 11:00 a.m. to 14:00. In reality the T 34 tank weighed 32 tons, but had a 76.2 mm piece. 30.5 calibers. Maybe Hitler was alluding to the T 35 from 50 tons. with a piece from 76 long 100 calibers, built by the Soviets only in some ten pieces due to mediocre results.
- 50 A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 121.
- 51 Cavallero Diary, cited. Summary of the meeting.

- 52 Reported by M. Gabriel, op. cited above, p. 182.
- 53 A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 119.
- 54 C. AUCHINLECK, Despatch cit., apt. n. 6.
- 55 Ibid., cit., apt. n.9
- 56 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 453, letter 11.2.1942.
- 57 Ibid, p. 454.
- 58 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 340.
- 59 Ibid, p. 341.
- 60 J. CONNELL, op. cited p. 461
- 61 Ibid "op. cited above, p. 476, letter from Auchinleck to Brooke dated 23.2.1942.
- 62 C. BARNETT, op. cited above, pp. 195-196.
- 63 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 463, letter 4.3.1942.
- 64 ARTHUR BRYANT, times of war, vol. II, the attack, Longanesi, Milano, 1966, p. 332.
- 65 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, pp. 343-344. In the dispatch, Churchill questioned the tank situation. According to the Cairo, 1<sup>st</sup> March the axis could put 475 medium tanks online and 1<sup>st</sup> April 1630. However, in London the *Panzerarmee* was believed held, on April 11, 159 *Panzer* and 87 M 13 tanks efficient, i.e. almost half than estimated in Cairo. Against them, according to the *War Office*, there were 174 tanks in Cyrenaica, 197 in the Delta, more than 167 new influx; a total of 538 tanks. In this it was necessary to add 252 infantry tanks. Altogether, then, you reached the number of 790 efficient tanks. Instead, according to Cairo for 1<sup>st</sup> April should be considered available for 330 battle tanks and 100 Valentine J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 467).
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 Ibid., p. 345.
- 68 I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 201.
- 69 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, pp. 345-346.
- 70 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 471.
- 71 Ibid, p. 484.
- 72 Marshall thought to assign target to operation *Sledgehammer* as Brest and Cherbourg, or both. Churchill had in mind other alternatives: landing in French North Africa (operation *Super Gymnast*) or in Northern Norway (Operation *Jupiter*). All with deep disappointment of the chiefs of staff.
- 73 A. BRYANT, op. cited above, p. 345.
- 74 Ibid. p. 346.
- 75 Ibid., p. 348.
- 76 C. AUCHINLECK, Dispatch cit., apt. n. 12.
- 77 Ibid. "Despatch cit., apt. n. 13.
- 78 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, pp. 486-488.
- 79 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 359, letter 5.5.1942.
- 80 F.H. HINSLEY, British Intelligence in the Second World War, vol. II, pp. 358 et seq., H.M.S.O., London 1981.
- 81 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 359, letter 5.5.1942.
- 82 I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 203, letter 9.5.1942.
- 83 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 360-361.
- 84 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, pp. 498-499, letter 19.5.1942.
- 85 Ibid, p. 499, letter 20.5.1942.
- 86 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, pp. 363-364, letter 22.5.1942.
- 87 Ibid, part IV, vol. II, p. 68.
- 88 F. H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, p. 366.
- 89 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, part IV, vol. I, p. 365.

## **CHAPTER FOUR THE BATTLE OF GAZALA**

### **1. THE OFFERED OUTLINE OF THE MANEUVER**

On 30 April, in Berchtesgaden, it had been decided to give priority to the offensive in Cyrenaica, defining the start between late May and early June. But two days before Bastico had gone to Umm er- Rzem and Rommel had anticipated his own outline, now in focus: a very clear project-annihilation of the British forces to the West of Tobruk and conquest of the fortress-that on April 30 was put in writing and formally communicated to the Comando Superiore, Kesselring and von Rintelen at (for the Italian Comando Supremo) and Weichold. The operational concept is translated into a frontal assault conducted by large infantry units between the coast and Mteifel el-Chebir, intended to engage the British defensive deployment, and a flanking maneuver with armored Corps occur in the direction of Bir Hakeim, to point, including attacks, to the North and move behind static enemy line. A motorized wing would act on the exposed flank, reaching el-Adem and then Acroma. The action was punctuated at different times, but closely spaced, whose guidance calculation foresaw the annihilation of the bulk of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army by the evening of the second day; the conquest of Tobruk on momentum, seamless, or obtained with an attack by the fourth day concluded. Considering necessary a couple of days yet for the reorganization and the supply of the units, on the sixth day the *Panzerarmee* was able to proceed to the frontier.

Of course the project was based on certain premises. Rommel as Bastico was unaware yet decisions taken with regard to Malta. He wanted to attack in the first days of June, i.e. in a lunar period, taking advantage of favorable balance of power at the time, that seemed acceptable, but after the Elimination of Malta. If, on the other hand, such an undertaking had been postponed, it would be adapted, meanwhile, to kick off his offensive. Therefore it was necessary to know urgently what had been established in Rome and Berlin. Then he needed the full realization of expected completion program and strengthening: inflow within the month of German reinforcements already announced (including 57 *Panzer* type III and IV) and units and funds allocated to bring to organic level the large Italian units; available on-site

25 units of fuel, 5 *unfoc* and 30 days of food; safe and massive Italian and German air operation. Also the Comando Superiore had to assign at least one of the divisions still in Ajdabiya, and there is no longer essential, to avoid the use of motorized units in the front, and also action constitute an Auto Group for transporting an entire Division at a time <sup>(1)</sup>.

Bastico transmitted immediately the project in Rome and dedicated on May 2 and 3 at a careful inspection, with Rommel, at the sides. On 5 May, in the afternoon, arrived Cavallero.

The Chief of the General staff landed at Benghazi, after a journey hampered by bad weather. Took advantage of the occasion to visit the port, work already so advanced that the daily discharge of about 2,500 tons. Then went on to Barce and examined with Bastico and Barbasetti the general situation, in particular with regard to the attitude of France and possible reversals in French North Africa, developments in the war in the Mediterranean and Malta enterprise. Then put on the table the Rommel project.

On the operative concept there was no substantial observation; the objections were, instead, about the requests, since, with obvious regret, it was forced to admit the impossibility of giving their full petitions. Generally speaking, much was accomplished in favor of German units, thanks to measures already adopted and to the favorable tonnage percentages assigned to ally in transportation for Benghazi; Conversely, the Italian units were completed by May could be achieved only in part: the deficiencies, substantial, would have covered the infantry divisions, especially in the automotive sector. Nothing against to pursue one of two divisions of Ajdabiya, and the provision of transport units for dismounted infantry, sourcing, well-known limits, vehicles in Cyrenaica, in view of the material make it impossible to transfer even one Auto Group from the Mainland within a month <sup>(2)</sup>. As for the competition of the other armed forces, reinforcement consisting of the 5th Air Fleet and was already expected and *Fliegerfuhrer* predisposed, while minimum could be naval contribution, only permitted for some insidious means.

This place, Cavallero wanted to clarify that “*the overall purpose to strive for the conduct of the war in Libya is to achieve the possibility of implementing site operations in Egypt*” <sup>(3)</sup>. It was the first time that unbalanced, even in principle. The March 23 directives, which explicitly confirmed those of the 11 February, approved the operation against Tobruk “*over the summer*” and predicted the advance “*towards the East*” in a subsequent time (after the influx of

two other armored divisions, one German and one Italian). The guidelines of 11 February, which calls into question, improperly placed in the foreground that “*at the base of each our disposal being the operational concept to ensure anytime and in any situation the defense of Tripolitania*” and restricted purpose of “*the occupation of Cyrenaica*” to facilitate the preparation, in due time, for the next action on Tobruk. There was an evolution in the guidelines is more than normal; that there was a far-sighted and breadth of operational views-as Cavallero will bring up in the directives that will impart to Bastico upon completion of the interview-it's all to prove. Note, in fact, the words to mean the aim: ... “*to achieve the possibility of implementing site operations in Egypt.*” Much clearer would be to “*wipe out British forces in Egypt*”, naturally regardless of how.

The fact is that Cavallero thought a long time. There is a note inside the *Comando Supremo* about the situation in N.A., compiled “by train” on 29 April and surely the respondent perspective of Cavallero because he corrected in pencil, which synthesized the *monthly requirement* of the *Cyrenaican* theater to compensate for the losses and also to arrange to cover consumption and changes:

| The military   | men   | vehicles | material       |
|----------------|-------|----------|----------------|
| Italians       | 5,500 | 300      | 52,500 tonnes. |
| Germans        | 1,200 | 150      | 22,500 tons.   |
| Monthly totals | 6,700 | 450      | 75,000 tons.   |

In addition, for the completion of the great Italian and German units already in Libya and the achievement of the expected minimum, needed autonomy altogether:

| Big unit | men    | vehicles | material      |
|----------|--------|----------|---------------|
| Italian  | 40,000 | 10,000   | 85,000 tons.  |
| German   | 12,000 | 10,000   | 40,000 tons.  |
| totals   | 52,000 | 20,000   | 125,000 tons. |

Ultimately, calculating to the completion by December 1942, Libya had to transfer to an average monthly (leveling



more complete rate) of 12,700 people, 2,700 vehicles and 90,000 tons of materials. Place that in April the transports had reached maximum numbers 18,000 men, 3,000 vehicles and 90,500 tons of materials, the memo concluded:

"If we can not meet big losses and to exceed the quantities delivered in April, we will have the G. U. Italian and German perfectly up to late autumn rather than at the end of the year. To the end of the year we will be able in this case to bring overseas other G. U. (for the Tunisian frontier or to feed operations eastward".

Everything, however, Cavallero made no mention. Limited himself to avoid unwelcome initiatives and became concerned not to leave any doubts in this regard. The operation plan was offering to destroy or wear down the Ritchie's 8th Army, to remove the enemy from the port of Tobruk, reaching the Sollum - Halfaya line, useful both as a defensive position as a base for further offensive; but had to refrain so absolutely from cause a profound wear Italian-German army, such as to jeopardize the laborious work of reconstruction and strengthening of our divisions. As a result, it was necessary to avoid to get bogged down in a resource-intensive investment of Tobruk or worse still-if Ritchie refused battle and withdraw his mobile unit – to let drag again into two dangerous and costly commitment to besiege Tobruk on one side and deal with British armored forces to the East.

Not only that, but the offensive was not to affect the preparation and execution of the operation C 3, which is essential for further development of the war in the Mediterranean. So was the absolute limit of 20 June to availability of aircraft reinforcements, which, after that date were to be withdrawn from Sicily.

At the end of the interview, Cavallero led and delivered to Bastico written directives of the Comando Supremo:

"1. Objective: to beat enemy mobile forces deployed in the West of Tobruk. In the event of a favorable outcome, obtained attack against Tobruk.

The capture of Tobruk is categorical condition for moving forward on our sides; If such a condition, the deployment will be brought on Sollum -Halfaya-Sidi Omar line, a line that the mass of the army shall not pass. If the occupation of Tobruk failed, deployment to be taken after the battle should not go beyond the line of Gazala (...)"<sup>(4)</sup>.

The next day, Cavallero moved with Bastico for Rommel who was aware of the conclusions which he had reached, and with whom he flew

by plane the entire front of the Italian-German line up North, where signals all landed and visited some strongholds. In the afternoon, at Derna, also attended by Kesselring and Fougier, reinforcements were established to transfer planes to Cyrenaica by the month: a group of *Stuka*, a fighter unit, a *Messerschmitt*, an anti-aircraft Division and a unit of paratroopers (to be specified) for the German side a; “Stormo\*” of Macchi 202 and CR 42 from Italy. In the morning of the Cavallero departed from the airport of Barce to return to Rome.

On the basis of what was agreed, Bastico was their directives received and passed to Rommel, placing at his disposal-but temporary-the *Sabratha* Inf. Div., a battalion of the *S. Marco* of the R. Navy, the XXXI and XXX battalion sappers, and security unit to an extent yet to be determined. Also expressed confidence they could provide what was requested, except for motor vehicles, and stated that the *Trieste* was reinforced organically with the XI Medium Tank battalion<sup>(5)</sup>.

Places in clear purpose and limitations of the offensive, on both sides, Italian and German, it proceeded to an intense development of the units.

Rommel had a British device framework sufficiently indicative, but approximated by default. According to the information services, up from just south of the Trigh Capuzzo you happened the troops of 13<sup>th</sup> Corps: the 1st South African Division, the British 50th Division and the Free France 1st Division, with the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade deployed in the area of Sidi Daoud, the via Balbia. On the front of these divisions acted three recon units: the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> South African battalion and a French unit. In the rear, at Tobruk, was collecting the 2<sup>nd</sup> South African Division. To the South, scattered between Bir Tengeder and el-Adem, seemed located the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, protected by the 1<sup>st</sup> *King's Dragoon Guards* in 30 Corp. The remaining units of Norrie were believed to be East of Tobruk: 1st Armored Division and the 200<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade.

According to this view, the deployment of the British 13<sup>th</sup> corps had a front of about forty kilometers (from Gazala to Bir b. Belafarit). The 30<sup>th</sup> Corps, however, was based on wide area to the South and East, to protect the southern flank of the army. Taking it for good, Rommel began to revise the *Panzerarmee*, then completed, improving at the same time, several times, their operational concept. The first orders were given on May 5, the day before the interview with Cavallero. In the morning, summoned Rommel to el-Cherima, seat of his tactical Command, the

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\* a Stormo is equal to a Wing or at least 4 Squadrons, but with average strength levels it would be about equal to one Allied Squadron. If at full strength about equal to two.

Corps and ordered the insertion of X Corps between the XXI and XX. Before the 10<sup>th</sup> the new line should include:

- in the North, XXI Corps with the 15th *Schützen*\* Brigade (Col. Alhamdu) and the *Trento* Inf. Div.;
- in the Middle, X Corps with *Brescia* Inf. Div. and *Pavia* Inf. Div.;
- to the South at the height of Segnali Nord, straddling the Trigh Capuzzo, XX Corp with *Ariete* Arm. Div. and *Trieste* Mot. Div.;
- at the southern end, in the zone of Segnali Sud, the 90th Light Div. (less the 15th Brigade);
- in reverse the DAK, now commanded by Gen. Nehring, who came from Germany to replace Crüwell, on leave.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> Rommel ordered the insertion of the *Sabratha* Inf. Div. between the 15th *Schützen* and the *Trento* by 20:00 and anticipated that the offensive would begin at 14:00 a day yet to be determined and that the X and XXI Corps would have invested the positions from Gazala to Bir Belafarit in two jumps, the second of which, on explicit order already at dusk the same day or, at the latest, the next dawn.

The new report for 12 May at el-Cherima. Now the concept of maneuver had come complementing detail (sketch No. 16). On the morning of x day the X and XXI Corps were to begin tracking. Reached the bases from which to attack, they would have continued working to the front and leading forces in enemy the feeling of an impending frontal effort against the Gazala. To generate such a feeling would help some specific measures, such as the use of armored divisions (which on the same evening would be returned to the respective divisions) on the front of the two Corps; the gravitation of heavy artillery fire in the area of X Corp; the intervention of the air force focused on the British rear positions and lines of communication; the withdraw of the 90th light from the zone of Segnali Sud to the rear of XX Corps; DAK's presence behind X and XXI Corps.

Only at 14:00 XX Corps, the DAK and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light should go to reach the respective zones, which they abandoned at 21:00 to move in the direction of zone B (about 50 kilometers to be covered). At the same time, the two infantry Corps had to tighten the line reached (about fifteen kilometers from the leading edge of current positions) and carry on all guns. Behind them some captured tanks and other vehicles were responsible for a kind of carousel, clearly visible, in order to simulate the movement of armored units.

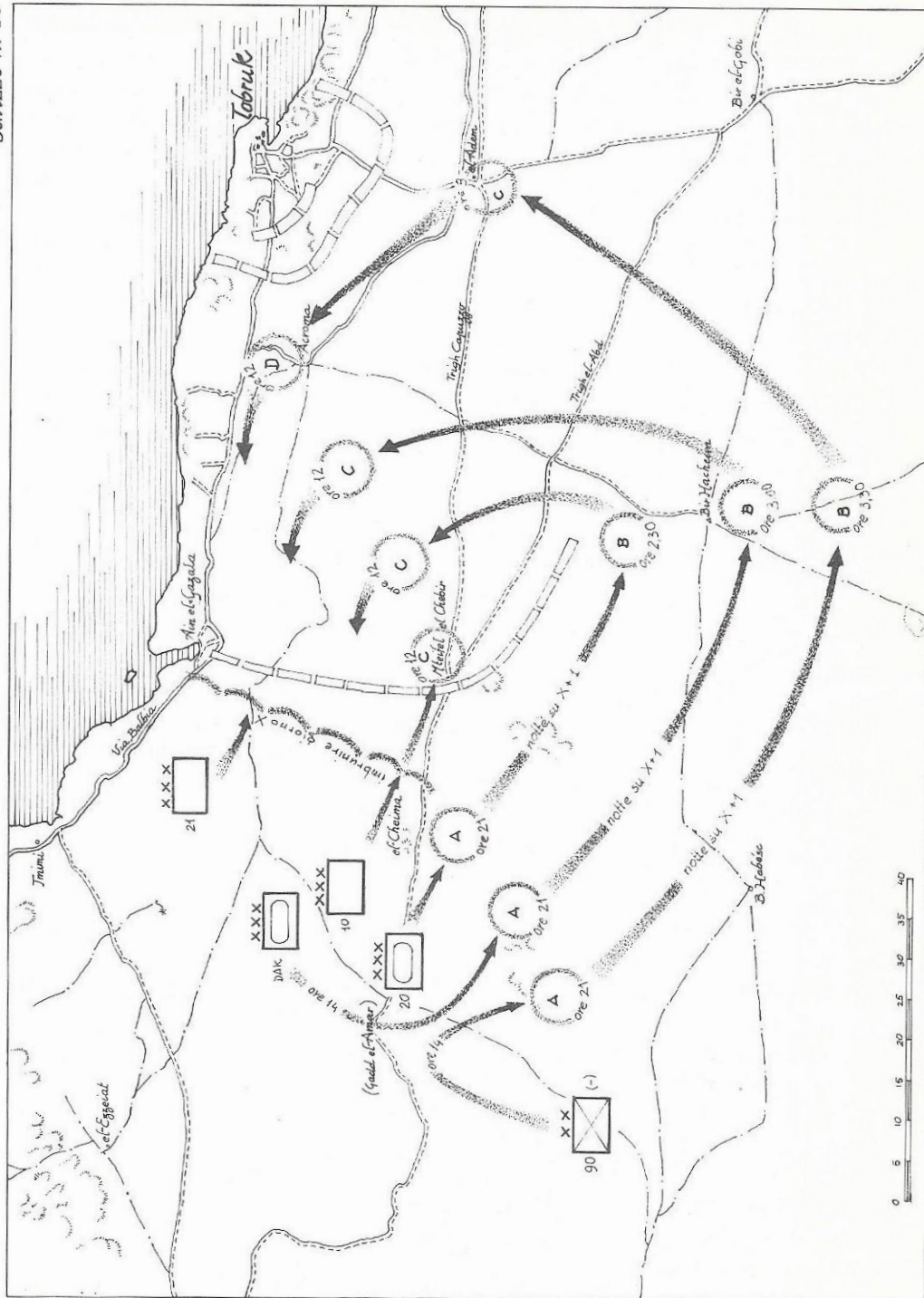
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\* When Germany first introduced [Motorised Infantry](#) in the 1930s those regiments that were the Infantry component of the [Panzer Divisions](#), prior to being known as [Panzer Grenadiers](#)

The battle plan of Rommel

IL PIANO DI BATTAGLIA DI ROMMEL

Schizzo n. 16



At the dawn of x day + 1 armored corps were to go from the zone of Bir Hakeim on their respective objectives C, while the 90th Light had the task of taking control of el-Adem and organize themselves to defend against likely attacks directions from North and East. To this fundamental task, the 90th Light had to push elements to Acroma. In this guise, around noon would be accomplished the encirclement of enemy forces operating in the West of Tobruk. In the case the 90th Light is not successfully to carry out this second part of the task, XX Corps and the DAK were widened the alignment conveniently. Throughout the movement, to be done with the right slightly more advanced, you should try to push the opponent towards the Northwest, to inhibit the escape to the East and South. In order to make it more showy the right-wing action, East of the 90th Light and at the same time it had to move with recon nuclei specially equipped vehicles to «lift dust». Similarly, it was necessary to proceed to fool the enemy in the interval between the 90th Light and the DAK.

Once received and completed the encirclement, with possible participation of landing units, would have begun the systematic annihilation of the British troops trapped, with a harmonious and regulated movement from East to West. Each unit was to oppose doggedly the likely failure of the attempts by the British. Could be particularly important, at this stage, the role of X Corps, tasked with preventing the enemy to escape from the area of Mteifel el-Chebir to the South.

According to the *Fliegerfuher* von Waldau the English fighter was destroyed by the second day. Then the battle of annihilation could be carried out at the end by the third day. Rommel wanted to move the place keeping command between the XX Corps and the *Afrikakorps*, while Kesselring had decided to personally lead the aviation intervention and, therefore, to settle near the front.

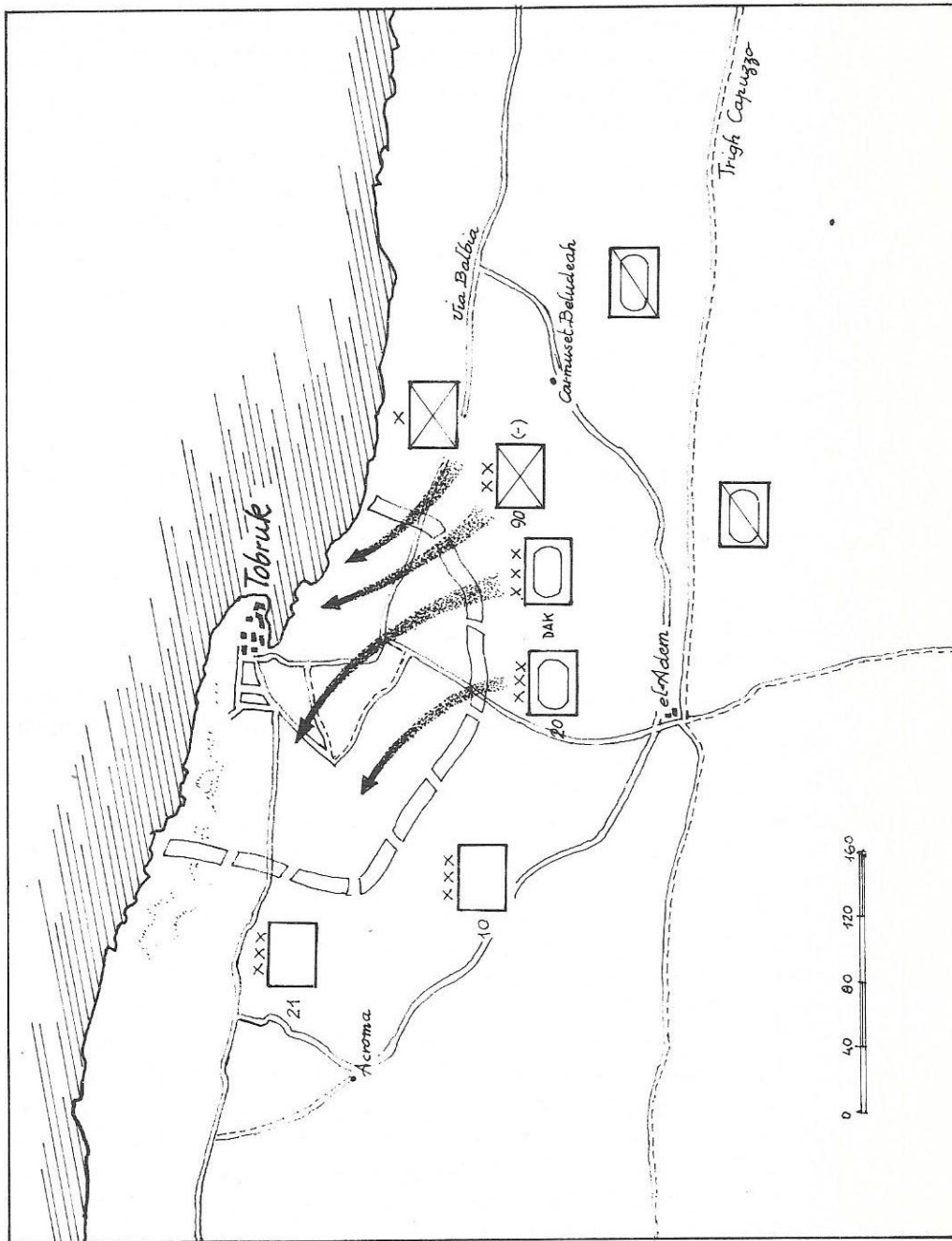
As for Tobruk, the attack obtained (sketch No. 17) was presumably already feasible within the fourth day; Anyway, I just realized the annihilation. Of course, the investment from the West would be conducted solely by elements of X and XXI Corps that could be truck transported. By all odds, the attack would lead the opponent to surrender within a day, given the very limited troops that were in charge of the fort.

The design was shown to Gen. Barbasetti, which, truth be told, was not entirely convinced of the "smoothness" of the plan.

The project obtained quickly to attack Tobruk

IL PROGETTO PER L'ATTACCO SPEDITIVO A TOBRUK

Schizzo n. 17



Exposed their doubts to Bastico, that shared them and told the Supreme Command. In summary: the encirclement could succeed and time expected if the British 13<sup>th</sup> Corps had not been eliminated and if the English 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division was easily overwhelmed. But there was worse: a simple delay in execution of the winding operation would enable the timely arrival on the battlefield enemy units located to the East of Tobruk, including the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., that the 90<sup>th</sup> Light didn't seem able to halt and repel. Aside, then, the unknowns on the, the real destruction of the English fighters (that you know of), the transition from battle of annihilation to the attack obtained at Tobruk, seamless, presented logistical difficulties perhaps insurmountable. According to Barbasetti, Rommel was basically limited to give the broad outlines of the operation, and then probably-and hopefully-he adjusted and perfect the blueprint. Let's say that in German field contrasts existed. One of the officers was most unsatisfied was Bayerlein, who comment:

"I never had any sympathy for this plan and as Chief of staff of the *Afrikakorps* tired me not to expose to Rommel my reservations. It seems too risky to proceed with the action without first removing the means of Bir Hakeim" (6).

But at Bir Hakeim Rommel didn't seem to give a lot of importance, probably due to the uncertainty on the level and quality of its garrison.

At the beginning there was talk of units of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. then the France 1<sup>st</sup> Light Division, a French brigade. The fact is that constituted a cornerstone susceptible not only to resistance to the bitter end but also to establish a foothold for the dynamic response of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. How is natural Rommel himself realize the various questions, but had confidence to be able to impose, and in time, their will to the enemy, as-admitted frankly- "*on a good dose of luck.*"

The 16<sup>th</sup> were summoned to el-Cherima Gioda, Navarini, the Divisional artillery and the commanders of the two armies, as well as the Commander of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Schützen* Brigade (Col. Alhamdu). Rommel wanted to deepen all aspects of frontal action with the stakeholders. The time was scheduled with a slight offset. The XXI Corps was to attack between the coast and Sidi Brehisc at 14:00 of x-l, preceded on wide front from a German tank battalion; the X, instead, move at 11:00 North of the Trigh Capuzzo, preceded by a battalion of XX Corps, ensuring the protection of the southern flank of the deployment

of attack. Reached in the evening established positions, the two Corps were placed to defend taking a checkerboard of cornerstones quickly. From 21:00 to 23:00 of x day and from 01:00 to 03:00 of x + 1 day a continuous noise with captured tanks and other vehicles had to give the enemy the impression that armored units close by near the front. In essence, Rommel needed the enemy to believe throughout the afternoon of day x and until the morning following the threat of a breakthrough at Ain el Gazala-Mteifel el Chebir.

They were agreed to the difficulty of achieving the objectives in the programmed time, having to bring in heavy weapons with enough ammunition and equipment also had to provide for water supplies, especially with the poor availability of efficient vehicles to the divisions. Rommel promised a hundred trucks to the Army Corps, and emphasized that the effort required to infantry troops will however almost completely finished by x day to the XXI Corps. The divisions of Gioda, instead, on the morning of day x + 1 had to move towards new goals, but the movement was echelons progressively pass over, resulting so far less cumbersome than the previous one. However, it was only thanks to this initial effort, in which everyone had to offer their total contribution, which would have been possible to achieve the rapid annihilation of the enemy, at relatively small losses, particularly for the infantry.

Passing the examination of the subsequent investment of Tobruk, Rommel pointed to the sectors of use: on the Western front of the fort for XXI Corps, on the South-western part to X Corp. Also in this regard the task of Navarini and Gioda was limited: it consisted simply bind the defense of these areas in order to facilitate the resolution of armored attack. When the time comes the two corps had to bring in vehicle, at the earliest, more consistent elements on new front. However, a division of the X Corps, of the second group, he participated in the action, penetrating in the fort through the breaches contiguous opened by XX Corp.

The Menny column (i.e. 15<sup>th</sup> *Schützen* Brigade, the Commander of *Panzerarmee* believed they can motorize) and 90<sup>th</sup> Light would presumably be under the command of Gen. Nehring, Cruwell's return, scheduled for 18 May.

The 17<sup>th</sup> was the definition of the use of the air force and naval transport. The meeting was held at Umm er- Rzem and, in addition for consideration, there he also unexpectedly joined by Kesselring.



For the air force, was planned before the battle (night on day x and the x morning), an action deeply against the bases of the *Desert Air Force* advanced to the main purpose of putting out cause the largest number of British fighters. The x day attacks were to be carried out in succession: 9 a.m. against enemy armored elements in South and South-East of South; from 14:00 against the enemy North of the Trigh Capuzzo, gravitating in the area south of Gazala, and lines of communication alleging from Gazala to Tobruk and Acroma; from 22:00 the railhead brought the enemy to the South-East of Tobruk and the existing *uidian* in the area of Gazala; by illuminating bombs and 23:00 with incendiary on Bir Hakeim to signal the direction to armored units. Since the first lights of the x day + 1 must have direct interventions on the Gambut area (Advanced Command of 8th Army) and broadcast centers already identified, against enemy forces in the South-East of Gazala, on the lines of retreat from Gazala and against British reserves possibly tributaries to el-Adem.

The Division of tasks and objectives between the Italian and German air forces had to be made by common agreement between Gen. Marchesi and von Waldau. Of course, during operation, Rommel reserved the right to take action deemed necessary from time to time. The Italian 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet was, moreover, protection of the Landfalls of convoys to Tripoli and Benghazi and coastal waterway from Tripoli to Derna and vice versa.

For naval forces the Adm. Weichorn put at the disposal of the army some 40 German means: nine submarines, eight Mas of 80 tons, eight patrol boats, nine motor sailboats, six steamers. With this complex of units you want to achieve-and protect against attacks by small elements from Tobruk and Alexandria-a landing by the Gulf of Bomba on the coast East of Gazala, to the rear of the British lines. The landing was entrusted to the *San. Marco* battalion and German units, especially pioneers. It also intended to protect coastal supplies from Benghazi to Derna, during the battle, as well as serve as a nucleus for immediate use of the port of Tobruk.

The R. Navy was the protection of coastal traffic between Tripoli and Benghazi; aid in the coastal defense of Derna with two pieces by 102, a battery of 76/30 and five pieces of 37 (all pieces that later were moved to Tobruk); the aid for the use of the port of Tobruk, with four minesweepers.

Two other topics were touched by Rommel during this period: secrecy and the spoils of war. The first of them also had to recall all Bastico for a strict control of radio and telephone traffic, as from interrogations of prisoners stood waiting for Italian-German attack. On 8 May Rommel wrote to the subordinate commands:

"I know that, particularly in the rear lines are disclosed nonsensical rumors of an imminent offensive. These rumors are devoid of any foundation. On the contrary it is to predict an upcoming British attack, for which the necessary measures are taken for the defense (...)" <sup>(7)</sup>,

and invited to report to the military judiciary severe cases. He had good reason to expect privacy, but it is doubtful that such letters are compelling. Even the reference to the operation ALFA, i.e. a defensive exercise within the framework (acronym E.D.C.Q. to report through evidence on all « exercise » documents) was not such as to deceive the expert eyes. Not for nothing London Radio at 20:30 on May 20 announced:

"Today's information from Libya suggests that is going to terminate the period of relative calm. Dispatches reached today by the Libyan front informed that the activities of the Axis forces in Cyrenaica is strongly increased (...)".

More effective, in terms of tactical, limited orders from time to time the indispensable, generally excerpt and without the general situation and outline the tasks of great lateral units, at least as far as possible. So the sequence of branching orders written by the *Panzerarmee Command* was as follows:

11 May: attack order No. 42/42 (operating notice);  
20 May: attack order No. 50/42, including nine annexes.

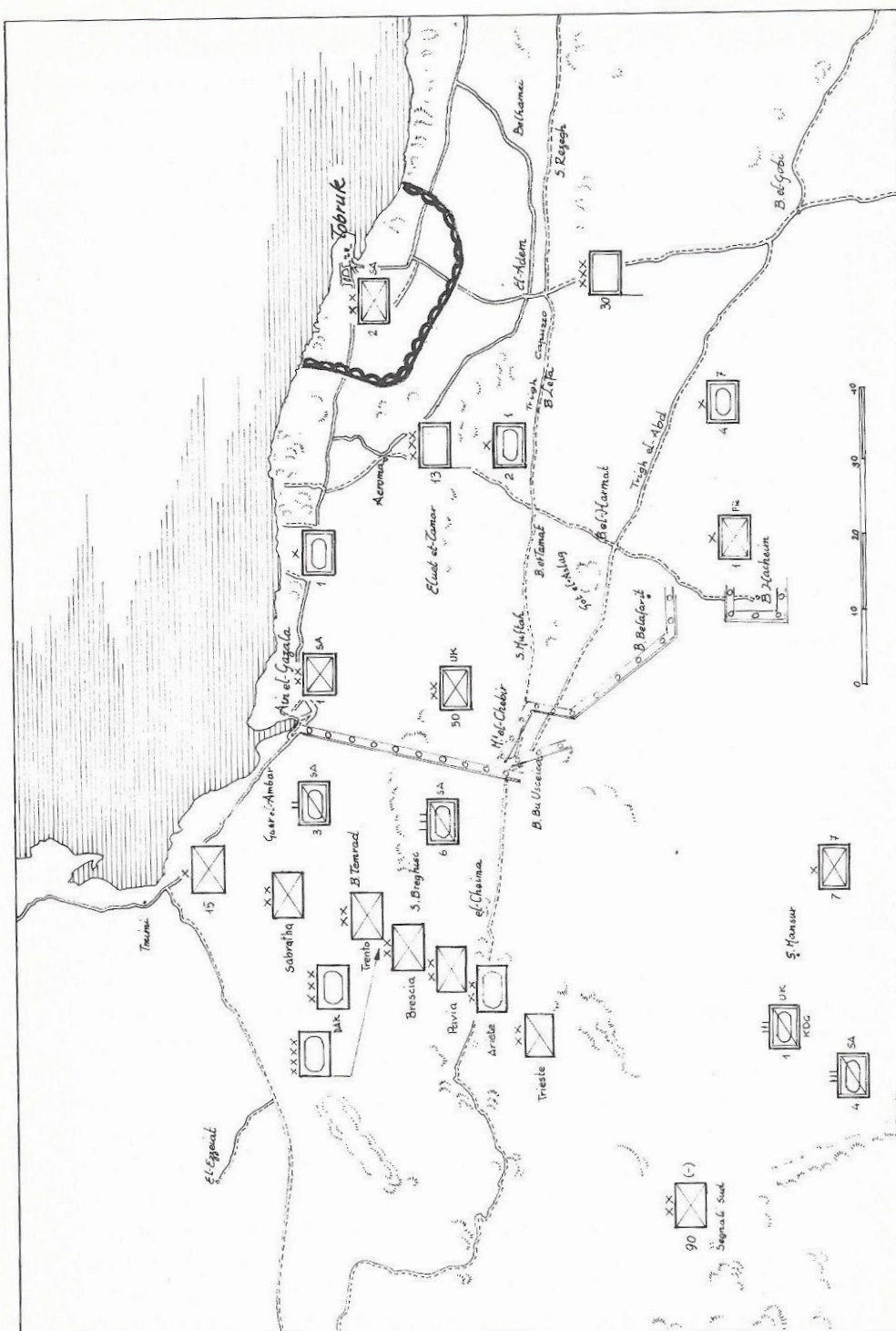
The commanders of the Corps, in turn, hand out forwarding of their verbal and written orders, between 21 and 25 May, of course, together with the improved information on the enemy.

On 25 May the defensive lineup (sketches No 18, 19 and 20) was ready to go on the offensive. That day the command of XX Corps wrote in his diary: *A historic late night "the A.O.K. [command-in-Chief of the Armored Corps Africa] announced that x day is the May 26. It gives immediate notice, via the officials to the divisions.*

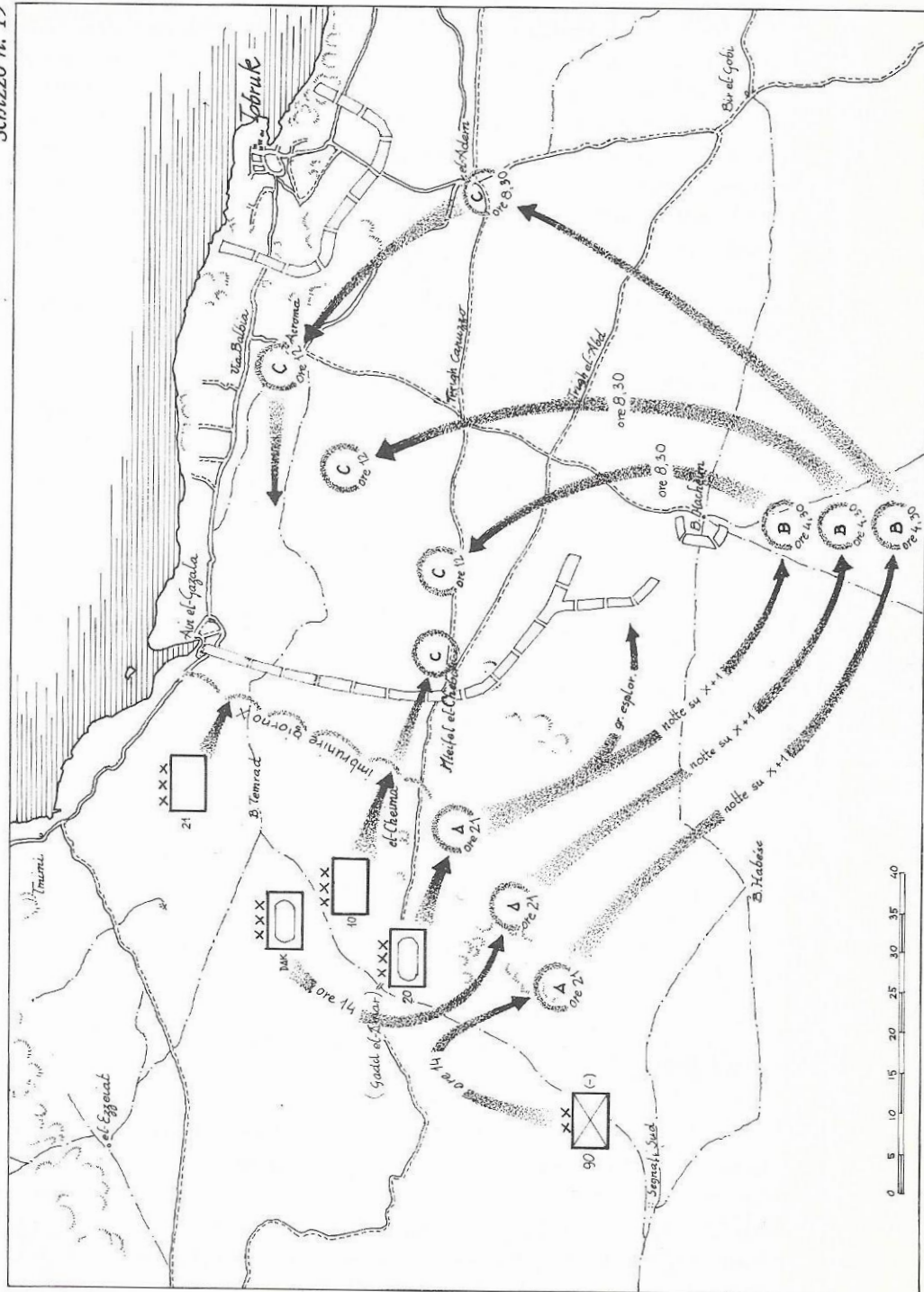
The second argument concerned the material captured on the battlefield. On 23 May Rommel will send an order extremely

LO SCHIERAMENTO DEL XXI CORPO  
LA SERA DEL 25 MAGGIO

Schizzo n. 18



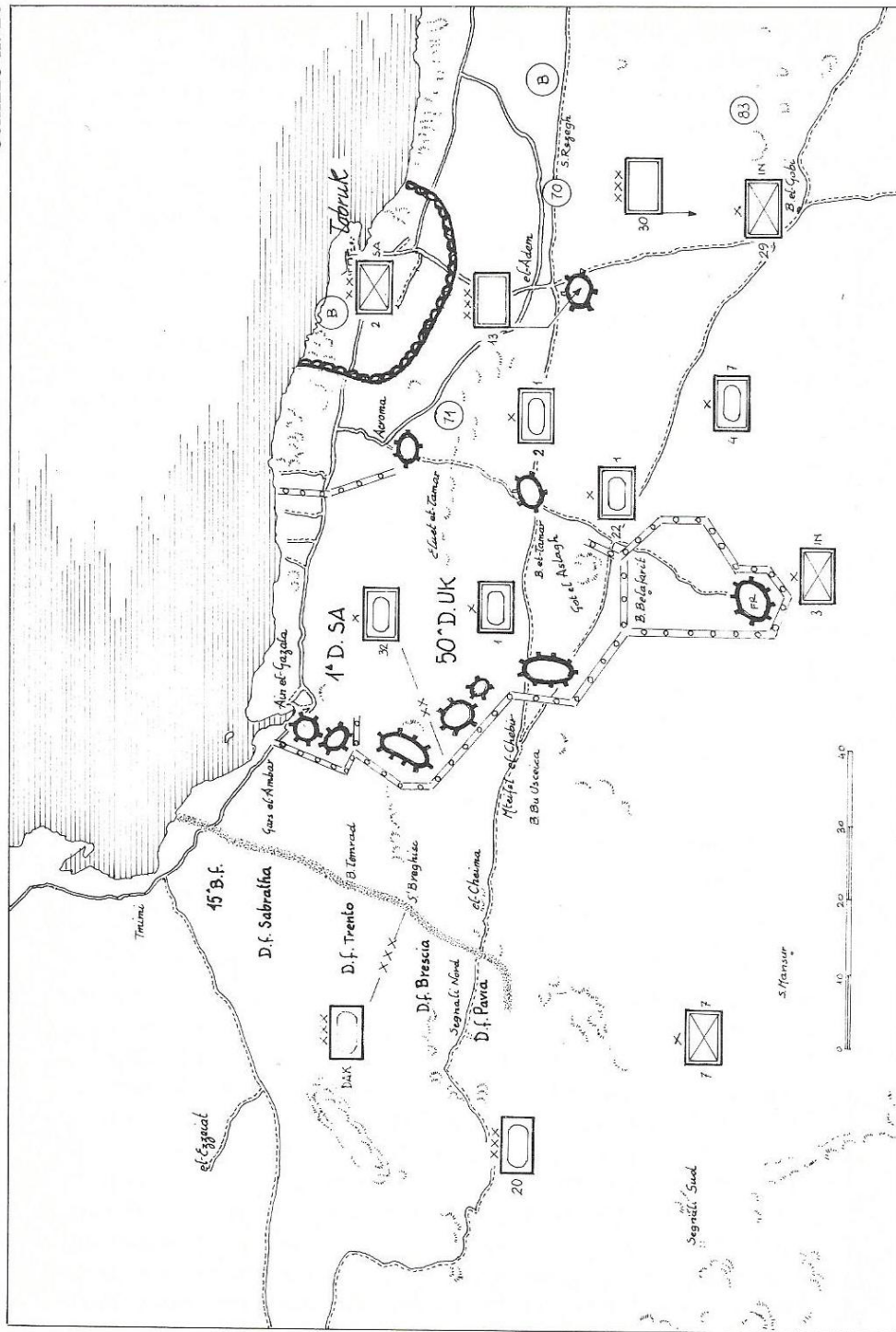
LO SCHIERAMENTO DEL X CORPO  
LA SERA DEL 25 MAGGIO



The deployment of the XX Corps on the evening of May 25

LO SCHIERAMENTO DEL XX CORPO  
LA SERA DEL 25 MAGGIO

Schizzo n. 20



explicit: all captured materials of war was owned by the armed forces and, given the situation of supplies in North Africa, it became necessary to use it to the fullest extent and in the best possible way. As a result, was prohibited to damage and destroy anything. The military could take with it what felt useful, without demanding more too. Everything else, including and especially the large depots (that it was necessary to defend a guard specifically left in place), it would have been withdrawn or handled by a special army recoveries unit. To avoid misunderstandings, the order specified that "*all the booty grabbed by this unit, it will be marked with clear blue tint: GERMAN-BOOTY SEIZED*"<sup>(8)</sup>. There's no surprise if there were discussions.

On the use of artillery intervened directly with the Comando Superiore. In that regard, there had been some divergence of opinion between Italians and Germans; the first more inclined to stick to the classical canons, the latter more likely to consider the problem of anti-tank defense. The great anti-tank gun deficiency was to lead to the dissolution of regiments and groups in favor of alignments for batteries (and even section) in strongholds of modest dimensions, thereby making it impossible to fire maneuver with mass actions and thus depriving the Division Commander of one of the most important elements of direct influence in combat.

Already in February Bastico had conducted from Gen. Manca di Mores, superior Commander of artillery, the directives to preserve centralized most of the artillery. Now the adjustment had been nearly completed and breaking a number of anti-tank guns, more than enough for an effective stop action (as of 20 May resulted in Cyrenaica about 800 pieces from 47/32) therefore required a reversal of trend. The deployment was to allow the first artillery mass action at a distance and close anti-tank action. If, however, the action and its neighbor are irreconcilable (situation to be considered in exceptional cases), the latter must have the prevalence and it was necessary to sacrifice first.

Convenience to not deploy artillery in strongholds, especially if small, stemmed also from the opportunity to avoid involvement in the initial fluctuations in the fight. In addition, one external party strongholds that conveniently protected, allowed more freedom to maneuver and fire the shot of repression.

These directives were framed in generic invitation to return artillery commanders functions relevant to them, including



the grading of the soil, "*indispensable means to achieve an organization capable of ensuring an immediate effective intervention of the artillery against sudden and mobile targets, such as tanks*". Nothing to say clearly on the principle of mass action of the Divisional artillery, especially given the paucity of medium artillery and heavy gauge; However, it was not easy to find a compromise because the piece from 47/32 was outdated and, most importantly, its armor-piercing ammunition had not yet deployed in adequate amount.

Rommel was sure of himself, was convinced that the plan would succeed, but ... some doubts persisted, especially as prisoners of the 8th Army were confident of an imminent offensive of the Axis and the main attack launched between Bir Hakeim and Bir el Gobi. In addition, by questioning you example that British command planned to resist the line Ain el Gazala – Bir Hakeim, full of expectations, and maneuver with the armored divisions in the area of Bir Hakeim and Bir el-Gobi <sup>(9)</sup> (sketch No. 21).

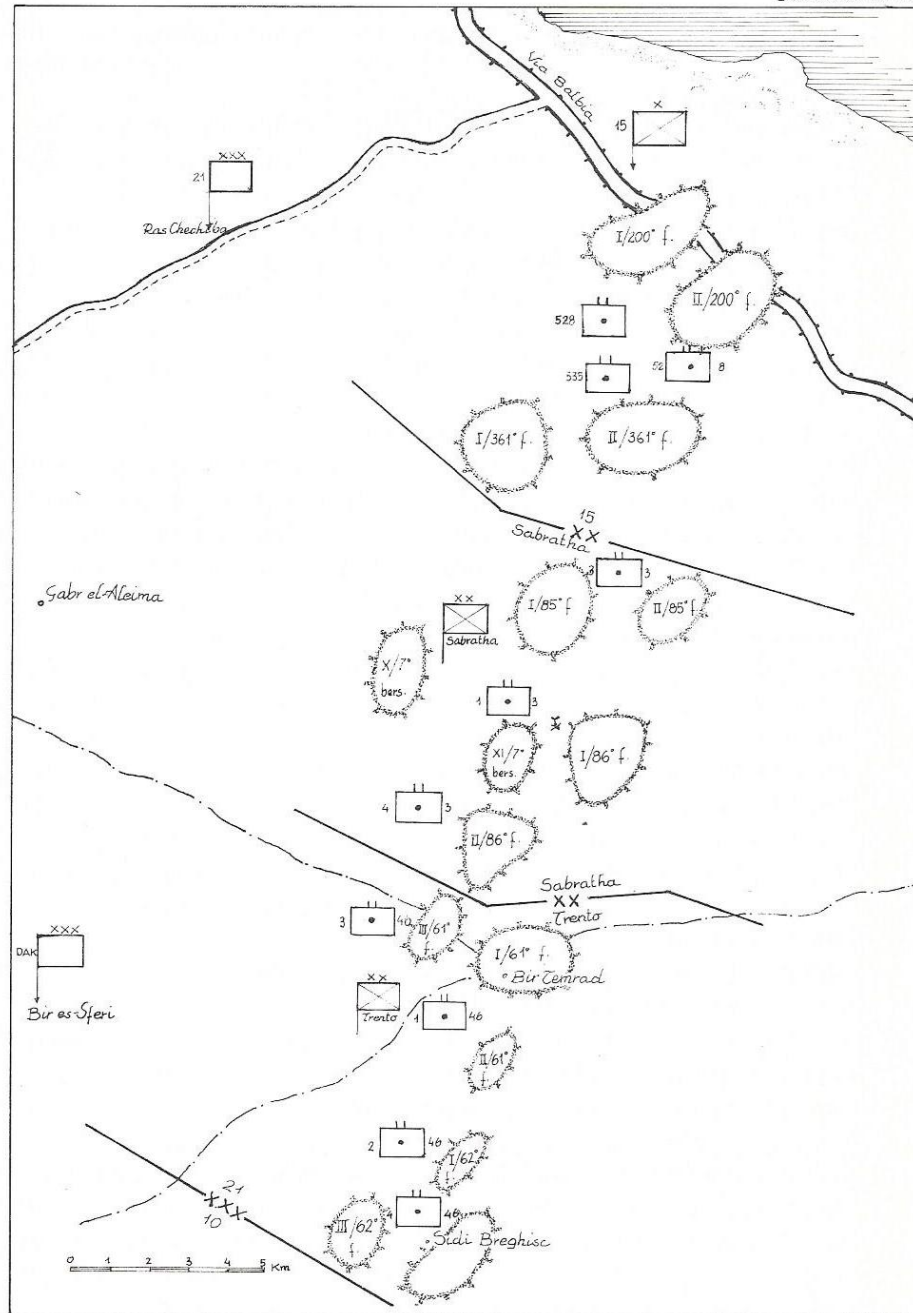
Gen. Gause, Chief of staff of the army, was not optimistic; hesitations and doubts also surfaced among commanders in the suborder, Italians and Germans. First of all it was necessary to solve the problem of command. Rommel intended, as you can imagine, follow closely the armored Corps and now well knew what difficulties could arise because of interruptions of radio links. To avoid the inconvenience of abandoning virtually to themselves the two Italian infantry Corps, he decided to entrust both to Crüwell. They had just returned from Germany deeply disturbed by the sudden death of a young wife and eager to think only to war, therefore entrusted the coordination of Rommel of X and XXI Corps (Navarini, much older, he learned not to raise fix) since May 25 and for the duration of the maneuver. The *Afrikakorps* remains, for the moment, at Nehring. The tactical Command of group Crüwell at Tmimi, settled near those of *Fliegerfuhrer* and East Italian aviation.

The identification of enemy units remained, more or less, it rebuilt the first of the month and differences with reality were not few (see chart on next page).

“Probably, thankfully, we underestimated the-British forces observed *a posteriori* by von Mellenthin-because if we had known the whole reality, even Rommel would have given up an attack against an adversary so bigger (...).

IL DISPOSITIVO ITALO-TEDESCO ED IL PRESUNTO  
SCHIERAMENTO BRITANNICO ALLA DATA DEL 20 MAGGIO

Schizzo n. 21





## BRITISH FORCES PARTICIPATING IN THE BATTLE OF AIN EL GAZALA

| According to the information service of the <i>Panzerarmee</i> (*)   | In reality  |
|--|---|
| <p>13<sup>th</sup> Corp<br/> 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa Inf. Div with,<br/> 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> brigade<br/> British 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. with,<br/> 69<sup>th</sup>, 150<sup>th</sup> and 151<sup>st</sup> Brigade,<br/> 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade,</p> <p>2nd South African Inf. Div. with,<br/> 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade (in Tobruk)</p> <p>30<sup>th</sup> Corp<br/> 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. with,<br/> 2nd Arm. Brigade</p> <p>7<sup>th</sup> Arm Div. with<br/> 4<sup>th</sup> Arm Bd, 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd, &amp; 1<sup>st</sup> French<br/> brigade</p> <p>East of Tobruk<br/> 200th Guards Brigade,</p> <p>22nd Arm. Bd (of 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div.)</p> | <p>13<sup>th</sup> Corp<br/> 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa Inf. Div. with,<br/> 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> brigade,<br/> British 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. with,<br/> 69<sup>th</sup>, 150<sup>th</sup> and 151<sup>st</sup> Brigade<br/> 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade,<br/> 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Brigade,<br/> 2<sup>nd</sup> South African Inf. Div. with,<br/> 6th Brigade and 9th Indian brigade</p> <p>30<sup>th</sup> Corps<br/> 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. with<br/> 2nd and 22nd Arm. Bd &amp; 201<sup>st</sup><br/> Guards Bd<br/> 7<sup>th</sup> Arm Div. with,<br/> 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd, 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd., 3<sup>rd</sup><br/> Indian Mot. Bd, 29<sup>th</sup> Indian Bd &amp;<br/> 1<sup>st</sup> French Bd</p> <p>East of Tobruk<br/> 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Div. with<br/> 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Bd, 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Bd &amp;<br/> 2<sup>nd</sup> French Bd<br/> <i>Dencol</i> group (heterogeneous forces<br/> of varies nations)</p> |
| (*) The resulting information on 20 May  |   |

We didn't know that the 22nd Armored Brigade and 32nd Tank Brigade were behind the Gazala line, they were aware of the existence of Knightsbridge stronghold held by the 201<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade. The 29th Indian Brigade at Bir el Gobi and the 3rd Indian motor Brigade to the South-East of Bir Hakeim had escaped to our attention and we realized that the minefield of Gazala extended far south of Trigh el-Abd to Bir Hakeim”<sup>(10)</sup>.

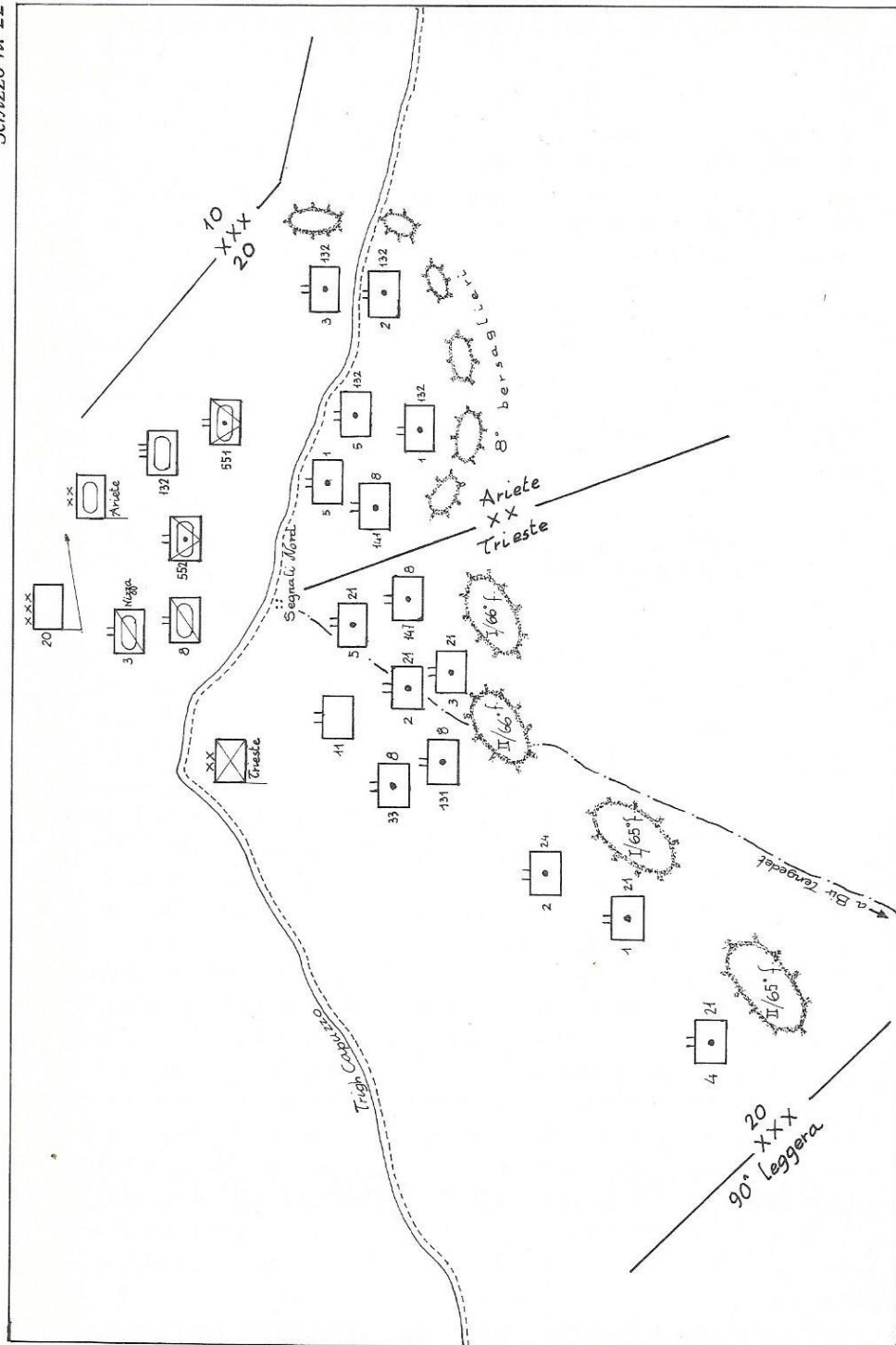
According to the annexes to the plan of operation, it was ascertained the existence of minefields that descended from the coast up to el-Chebir and Mteifel then continued until Bir Belafarit. Others were allegedly around Bir Hakeim. In fact, aside from their huge extension, ever seen in North Africa, said minefields continued up to Bir Hakeim and then back west of Bir Harmat.

Three could be considered the key points for the success of the offensive: the Got el-Ualeb, the defense of Bir Hakeim and the reaction of Ritchie's armored units. The importance of the first was completely missed. While Rommel was a gap from Mteifel el-Chebir (the extreme south of the English 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div.) at Bir Hakeim (held by the 1<sup>st</sup> *France Libre* Brigade), at Got el-Ualeb, between the Trigh Capuzzo and Trigh el Abd, there existed a stronghold consisting of the English 150th Brigade: *everything depended on the cornerstone of the 150th Brigade at Got el-Ualeb*- Bayerlein had to comment - *We didn't even know that it existed*”<sup>(11)</sup>. As to Bir Hakeim, its garrison was valued at about 5-6,000 men and not to hold such a heavy impact. Finally, the uncertainty of a counterattack by armored units was reputedly settled with the threat of breakthrough created North and that would attract the 2nd and the 4th Armored Brigade, unique pieces of the 1st Armored Division and known in place. It was primarily the 4th Armored Brigade, the strongest, that it was necessary to move. After some hesitation, Rommel decided to protect himself with a Variant (*Venezia*) in the plan: If the first day of action the 4th Armored Brigade were still reported to the East of Bir Hakeim, the movement of the mass of maneuver would have been appreciably expanded in order to pass the left of XX Corps about six kilometers south of the village. And with *Venezia*, Rommel was not entirely convinced of the void between Mteifel and-Chebir and Bir Hakeim. In fact that the XX Corps pushed a strong recon group into that stretch into the night on day x + 1 (sketch No. 22).

As you can see, as far as know about British deployment, Rommel's plan was correct. It contained the boldness because too many anchors had escaped to the mosaic or had not been placed at the right place, however objectively the problem falls within the normal range. We say,

## LA VARIANTE «VENEZIA» AL PIANO DI ROMMEL

Schizzo n. 22



Incidentally, the Comando Superiore information services had played less optimistically finding: in his opinion were also the 22nd Armored Brigade of the 1st Armored Division and the Indian 5th Division. On the other hand believed that Bir Hakeim was defended by the *France Libre* Division.

The total calculation of tanks made by the Commander of *Panzerarmee* was as follows:

1<sup>st</sup> Arm Div.:

Command: 18 *cruisers*

2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd.: 124 *cruisers* and 36 *Grant*

22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd.: 124 *cruisers* and 36 *Grant*

7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div.:

Command: 8 *cruisers*

4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd.: 82 *cruisers* and 72 *Grant*.

1<sup>st</sup> Tank Bd.: 4 *cruisers* and 150 between *Matilda* and *Valentine*. 38<sup>th</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup>

Royal Tanks: 100 Stuart.

Ultimately, the 8th Army appeared to have 100 light tanks, 494 medium tanks and 150 infantry tanks, for a total of 744 tanks, reducible to about 650, whereas a 10% means inefficient. *Panzerarmee* could oppose with 333 *Panzer* (53 Pzkw II, 242 Pzkw III and 38Pzkw IV) of the *Afrikakorps* and 228 M 13 tanks and M 14 of 20th Corp totaling 560 efficient means.

As to the quality, according to the German intelligence service the Americans medium *Grant* tanks (called M 3 *Pilot*) gave little expectation and had provoked much criticism from the British: cannon rotating by hand; You can only shoot from standstill because moving, to 300-400 meters, it was inaccurate; unsatisfactory ammunition, since Cannon projectiles from 75 with M 46 fuse at a distance of more than 700 m shot bounced off without exploding; lack of spare parts <sup>(12)</sup>. It was a lack of concern for the *Grant*. Rommel said that the 27 May, day x + 1, German armored units had an unpleasant surprise: the new *Grant* tank, since used by the enemy for the first time” <sup>(13)</sup>, but the surprise is by subscribing to the efficiency demonstrated by this means on the battlefield, rather than its not unknown presence <sup>(14)</sup>.

Even the 5th Air Fleet was more advanced with new additions and substitutions. On the eve of the offensive the sector East (Gen. D'Aurelio) had the following fighter units:

1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> fighter wing with Ma. 202 at Martuba  
 2<sup>nd</sup> fighter wing with Ma. 200 at Martuba  
 350<sup>th</sup> Bomber wing with Cant. Z. 1007 bis at Barce  
 50<sup>th</sup> Assault Wing with CR 42 in el-Ftèjah  
 150<sup>th</sup> Fighter group with Ma. 200 in Benghazi  
 131<sup>st</sup> and 133<sup>rd</sup> torpedo Group with S. 79 in Benghazi in total 392 aircraft.

The connection with the Comando Superiore was held by Gen. Marchesi, the *Fliegerfuhrer* for Gen. D'Aurelio, that with the Commander of *Panzerarmee* from a nucleus equipped with radio link. To harmonize the criteria for use, he entrusted to the Macchi 202 control of heaven from the battlefield, while the Macchi 200 and CR 42 was donated ground attack against ground units on the move. The CR 42 was also assigned the task of nighttime attacks on enemy communications. The Cant. Z. 1007 bis was bombing, primarily nocturnal, the fort of Tobruk, while torpedo planes were reserved for the protection of convoys arriving in Benghazi as well as coastal escorts from Benghazi to Derna during action.

Of course he knew that even the *Desert Air Force* had been strengthened. Axis aerial photo reconnaissance had revealed a significant increase in fighter aircraft deployed advanced camps Ain al-Gazala, el-Adem, of Sidi Rezegh, Gambut, of Gasr el-Arid and Bir el-Hanascia. On the basis of that information had been calculated that as of 24 May, the enemy had in Marmarica over 230 fighter aircraft, including the latest types of *Hurricane* (armed with two guns and six machine guns) and the powerful *Kittyhawk* (armed with four guns and two machine guns) fully able to stand up to the Germans Me. 109.

Essentially, the ratio of the opposing forces appeared slightly unfavorable. Evaluation of *Panzerarmee* indicated 50 Axis infantry battalions against 55 British; 560 against 650 tanks; 148 armored cars against 3-400; about 700 planes against a thousand. On the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> Bastico went to Umm er- Rzem where he had an interview with Rommel. The logistical organization was the subject: there were facilities to a level never achieved until then; autonomy amounted to five *unfoc* three months of food, 12,000 tons of fuel. They were hoarded, moreover, large quantities of materials and sanitary engineering. The divisions, well that low, had been put back in back in order (vehicle issue aside, of course). So

“Colonel General Rommel — recorded the Comando Superiore historian diary-to receive the good wishes of Ecc. Bastico and Barbasetti for upcoming operations, has explicitly stated that now as never before had had at its disposal a so strong Italian-German army. If in the winter, with a ratio of 1 to 7 tanks had regained the Cyrenaica, now with a ratio of 1 to 1 could have had much more sensitive results, that the wealth of available Aviation would have made even more”<sup>(15)</sup>.

\* \* \*

At the same time the forward the order of Rommel, Auchinleck sent his guidelines to Ritchie with a long letter personally visited by Gen. Corbett, new Chief of staff of the Commander-in-Chief.

Under pressure from London, Ritchie had prepared the plan for the operation *Buckshot*, the offensive is in charge of pursuing the objectives of *Crusader*. Now the experience had taught him that set on a methodical advance along the via Balbia, i.e. through the *gebel*, was difficult and slow. For a quick and successful maneuver to cut out all the harsh *gebel*: on what couldn't be doubt. Excellent starting point for an offensive conducted with 30<sup>th</sup> Corp of Norrie appear at Bir Hakeim. From this locality could point towards el Norrie-Mechili, threatening the turning from South of the *Panzerarmee*, while 13<sup>th</sup> Corp of Gott would frontally pressed the Axis infantry. It was, in a certain sense, the reverse of Rommel's plan. But while he wanted the action of X and XXI Italian Corps held to the North by British Armored units, Ritchie was intended to offer an alternative. If the DAK and the XX Corps were down South, Norrie would give them battle through a series of Brigade sized strongpoints, formed during the advance quickly to 50 kilometers from each other. If Rommel had not reacted and it was kept in the North with the bulk, Norrie's armored troops would go in the direction of Msus and Benghazi to cutoff the Axis retreat. Similar project was convincing that it's hard to say, in fact among those who believed it was just unworkable were Gott and Norrie.

However, Rommel's attitude was so menacing-despite privacy measures adopted-that the strengthening of the Gazala received the right priorities. But *Buckshot* had involuntarily negative reflections on the defensive scheme. In view of the new boost to Benghazi and Tripoli, had been taken numerous and important logistical measures. It was not so much of the depots to support immediate emergency of two Corps:

the *Field Supply Depot* No. 71 was between Acroma, and el-Adem; No. 70 between el-Adem and Belhamed; No. 83 to about ten kilometers northeast of Bir el Gobi. Ben more importance were the two major bases, advanced of Tobruk (about 10,000 tons of material) and Belhamed (25,000 tons of supplies), in addition to that, far more limited of Giarabub with a thousand tons. -Of these bases, Belhamed had particular value both for the magnitude of its depots, even if not at 100% as of May 26, both for the proximity of the railway head from Bir Misheifa, in Egypt, where it was at the beginning of *Crusader*, had been carried out in record time soon falls Italian-German defenses of the border.

Now, the need to give some protection to such logistical apparatus led to the creation of numerous locations in the system and significantly scattered. Furthermore, this does not suffice to alleviate the concerns of Ritchie, being the basis of Belhamed in the middle of the battlefield. Even the establishment of a strongpoint at that block for Bir Hakeim forty kilometers from Mteifel el-Chebir, depended to a large extent by *Buckshot*.

Auchinleck was convinced that the possible lines of action for the enemy will reduce to two fundamental (sketch No. 23).

The first translated in the turning of the southern flank of the British line, taking or passing along the way, Bir Hakeim and then advance on Tobruk. The whole thing was probably accompanied by a diversionary attack carried out with plenty of artillery, dive bombers and security against the northern flank, and perhaps even facilitated by landings from the sea on the rear areas of Gazala to achieve, moreover , the via Balbia.

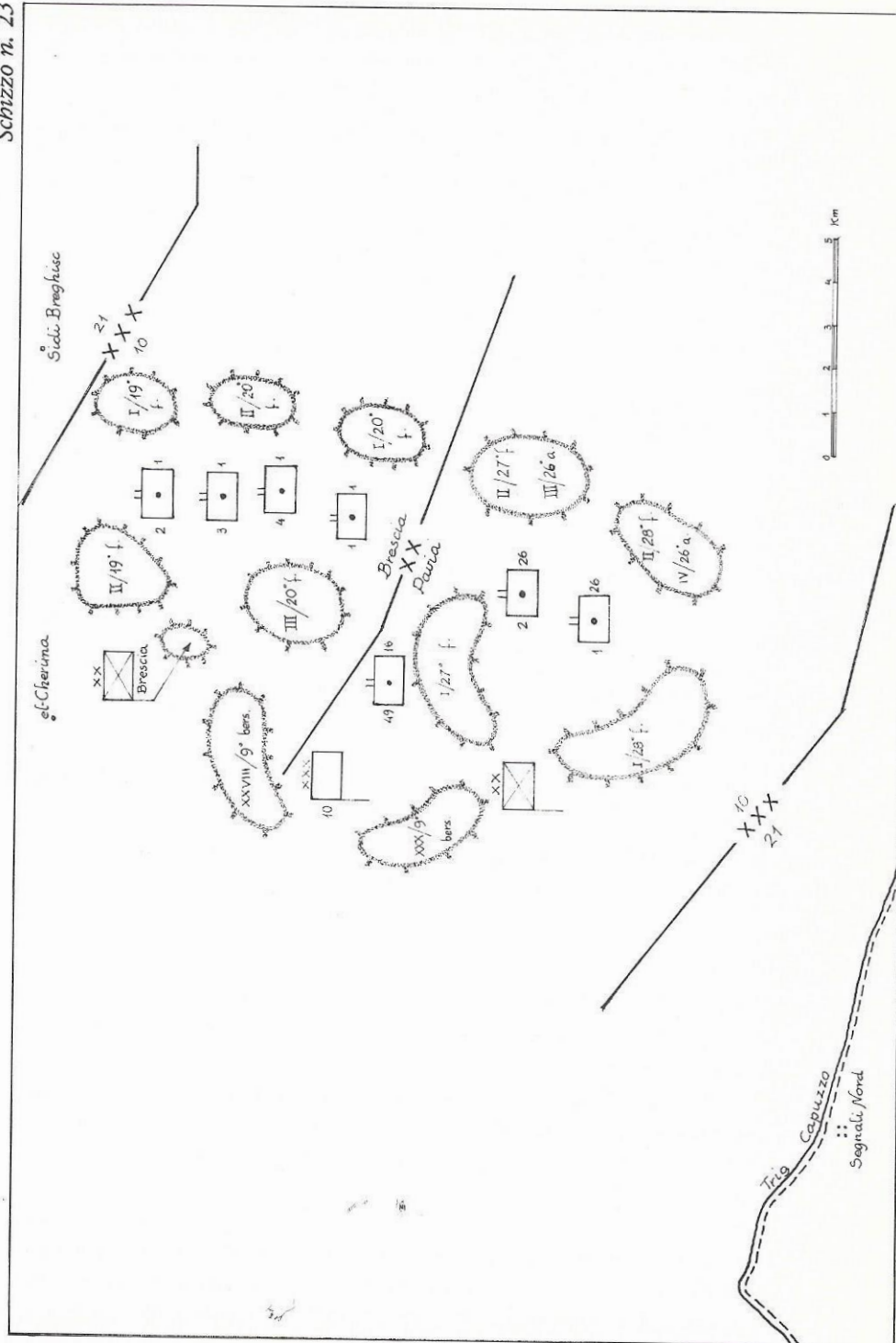
The second line of action was considered inappropriate in a heavy, concentrated narrow front attack against the center of the 8th Army, to allow the immediate continuation of the effort on Tobruk. In this framework was likely a feint against Bir Hakeim implemented by Italian tanks, in order to induce the British armor to flock towards the South and leave so green light to main German attack. Even in this case was to expect a landing from the sea in the area of Gazala.

“Believe-continued in his directives-Auchinleck that the second alternative would be just what I am and that you would have for sure as most dangerous to us, because it would cut in half our forces and likely would lead to the destruction of the Northern part. Of course we have to be ready to face the opponent if you choose

The British troops and the alleged German-Italian deployment on 20 May

LO SCHIERAMENTO BRITANNICO ED IL PRESUNTO DISPOSITIVO  
ITALO-TEDESCCO ALLA DATA DEL 20 MAGGIO

Schizzo n. 23





the first solution, but you must be very careful not to bind your armored units until you have clarified beyond any reasonable doubt, where the bulk of the enemy tanks are attacking (...)"

To better expose their thoughts, Auchinleck was to hatch the outline of the alternative considered most likely and most dangerous. In his opinion, Rommel would push the mass of his armored divisions along the Sidi Breghisc- Acroma, that is pretty much at the limit of the field between the 1st South African Inf. Div. and the British 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div.. Accepting the possibility of a breakthrough, despite the wide and extensive minefields, it became obvious by the German-Italian set up two defensive sides to protect the breach and carrying forward the anti-tank pieces, the campaign artillery and supplies. If, as expected, called defensive flanks were laid to the escarpment overlooking the via Balbia North and hilly reliefs twist and turn along the Trigh Capuzzo and immediately well manned, it would have been very difficult to cut them, especially taking into account the current location rather gravitating towards the South of British armored divisions. Meanwhile, the Axis feint of the against Bir Hakeim, pursued with determination, it would have resulted in a veritable secondary attack if just got some success.

"I know that you have taken and are taking-Auchinleck-many measures continued to face a possibility which I described, but I have to tell you that (...) I wonder if you couldn't bring your tanks a lot further north, where they are able to hit the enemy soon emerges from the breach and before he can prepare a defensive flank, as experience teaches us that he will definitely make (...)"

And he pointed to the best armored divisions location: straddling the Trigh Capuzzo, where they are in a satisfactory condition to intervene as required by the situation. Furthermore, numerous reconnaissance units would give timely information on Italian-German moves. No armored units had to be distracted for the immediate support of Bir Hakeim: this was already sufficient available the Indian 3rd motorized brigade,.

"Consider-admonished Auchinleck-of the highest importance that does not break the entirety of the two armored divisions. They were trained to fight as divisions, I hope, and how must combat divisions. Norrie must dispose of it as Corps Commander and be able to take advantage of the flexibility of the two formations conferred".

The long letter ended with an explicit invitation rather than with a suggestion

“For a defensive battle I think you need to have a mobile reserve, which your armored force, free from any static charge. Your army is divided in my view, in two parts, one to hold the Fort the quadrilateral Gazala-Tobruk-el Gobi-Bir Hakeim-and the other with that of hitting the opponent as he tries to make his way and destroy it. I think that Gott will be responsible only for the first and Norrie for the second. I immediately raised the latter from liability for Bir Hakeim”<sup>(16)</sup>.

Of the two points on which they had dealt with the attention and the recommendation of the Commander in Chief-that the two armored divisions fought together and not in parts and that defeated the enemy, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army does not lose time to switch to the offensive-Ritchie refused to collect the first and could not even think about the second.

Preparations carried out in British side concerned, naturally, first and foremost, the reorganization of the army and of the *Desert Air Force*, then the defensive attitude to fend off the increasingly likely Rommel's attack.

Auchinleck had studied the events of *Crusader*, trying to identify the causes of partial and final failure. Especially by comparison with the German formations, he became convinced of the unsatisfying sort of divisions and armored brigades and motorized. It was a lack of cooperation between tanks, artillery and infantry capable of producing concrete results and satisfaction. Apart from a certain feeling spread among other weapons-but also in London that had not armor, made to feel their weight as it was legitimate to hope, the action in normal way to complex mixed battle appear as the best solution in similar environment:

"It seemed to me-he wrote later — that our divisional prewar order was too rigid and lacked flexibility to be adapted to the vicissitudes of a modern war of rapid movement in the wilderness, or elsewhere, since the great battles are fought and won in lowland soils and not in the mountains”<sup>(17)</sup>

In addition, Auchinleck had believed that the concept of establishing large armored divisions, with tanks and relatively weak in infantry, wrong, partly because it tended to entrench the belief that the armored weapon was something independent. For the purposes of the instrument was flexibility instead should have a greater number of divisions less strong in tanks but adequately equipped with motorized infantry. Therefore decided to transform brigades into “*brigade groups*”<sup>(18)</sup>. Based on this review poses two organic principles: each Brigade Group was to be plural, each armored brigade was to have its own share of motorized infantry.

As a result, an Armored Division was to have an armored car Regiment, an armored brigade group (with three tank regiments, a motorized battalion and a field artillery regiment and anti-tank), a group of motorized brigade (three battalions on a motorized tank and artillery regiment, anti-tank, units of engineering, broadcasts and services) and sub-units. The tank brigades, each with three infantry tank, regiments continued to be excluded from Divisional organic: for they expected the assignment as a reinforcing element in relation to the needs of the moment. As for the Infantry Division, its sorting involved three infantry brigade groups, each of which three battalions, a tank and artillery regiment anti-tank and smaller units. It should be noted that the idea of “*Brigade Group*” was not something new for the British systems, as already created earlier for special tasks in that same theater<sup>(19)</sup>. That said, it should be noted that, for the sake of simplicity, we will continue to use the term *Brigade* because on May 20, 1942 will be issued from London new organic tables that will abolish the divisional level *Brigade Group* and restore the “Brigade”.

This change order resulted in variations in other sectors. The infantry battalion had a company command, three rifle companies and a support weapons company, the latter on a 3 inch mortar platoon, a platoon of 2 pounder anti-tank guns and tracked on a *Bren carrier* platoon. Motorized battalion was formed by a company command, three motorized companies and one anti-tank company on sixteen 2 pounder guns. The campaign artillery and anti-tank regiment had three campaign battery with eight pieces 25 pounds and an anti-tank battery with sixteen pieces of 6 pounds (57 mm).

For tank regiments the speech was influenced by special reasons. It was the first line of American tanks M 3 or Grant, armed with a gun of 75 in virtually casemate, with high-explosive shells (h.e.) piercing and with Cap (A.P.C), and with a 37-piece in the turret. Notwithstanding certain flaws (lack of speed in varied terrain, delicacy of the pointing device, the contraption tendency of the turret to stick), is a tank provided with excellent armour (maximum thickness, in the turret, 57 mm), possibility of throw at a distance greater than those allowed by the British media and potential use of projectiles both of H.E. and A.P.C. both (the only tank able to do this). Was superior to the *Stuart*, now used more correctly as light tank; the *Crusader*

that pushed into production before adequate testing of the prototype, had shown on the battlefield several mechanical deficiencies; and the *Valentine*, who had replaced almost all the *Matilda*, and which could be used, if at all, as a medium tank. In essence, contrary to what is considered by the German intelligence service, the *Grant* was the best tank which the Eighth Army had.

He derived that the psychological reason to assign to each tank Regiment the *Grant* prevailed over the organic principle homogeneity of the means provided for each regiment. It was thus decided to give to some regiments two squadrons of *Grant* and *Stuart*, two squadrons of *Crusader* and one *Grant*.<sup>(20)</sup>

Not all these measures however were completed before May 26. In particular, they had arrived at 8<sup>th</sup> Army only 112 - 6 pounder guns, so most anti-tank batteries still had 2 pounder guns and many infantry battalions were no anti-tank piece.

Gen. Corbett departed with guidelines for Ritchie, Auchinleck had second thoughts at the whole situation and wanted to send a few more line to the Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army:

“(…) The enemy is impatient and his attack can come from one day to the next. As you know from my earlier letter, I'm rushing reinforcements for you with all my energy! I believe that if you failed to convey how much you have and how much harmonically you are going to receive a great blow against the enemy, we will send him to hell! I have full confidence in your ability to do this (...)”  
(21),

and downplayed the possibility of concrete a landing from the sea or from the air. Ritchie said three days after the Commander-in-Chief reassuring and explaining that his concerns about the location of armored divisions were unfounded, because due to a trivial error of transcription of checkmarks on topographic maps. Then he wanted to summarize his appreciation of the situation:

“(…) 2. All indications, I suggest that we can expect the attack of the enemy very soon (...).His recent remarkable increase of means of transport and the fact that the possibility of unloading in the port of Benghazi we will be able to reduce the ordinary carriage between Tripoli and the deployment will enable a large range for his mass of impact. I am still convinced that, if the logistical support will allow him, he will try to circumvent our southern flank. In any case there will be a diversionary action and will probably be carried out by the mobile Corp.

## ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE BRITISH 8th ARMY

On the date of 26 May 1942

Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army (Gen. N.M. Ritchie):13<sup>th</sup> Army Corp (Gen. W.H. Gott) with:50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. British (Gen. W.H. Ramsden):69<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. (Gen. L.L. Hassel)150<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. (Gen. C. W. Haydon)151<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bd. (Gen. J.S. Nichols)1<sup>st</sup> Inf. Div. South African (Gen. D.H. Pienaar):1<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bd. (Gen. J.P. Furstenburg)2<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd. (Gen. W.H.E. Poole)3<sup>rd</sup> Inf. Bd. (Gen. R.J. Palmer)2<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Div. South African (Gen. D Kloppe):4<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. (Gen. A.A. Hayton)6<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. (Gen. F. W. Cooper)9<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. Indian (Gen. B.C. Fletcher)1<sup>st</sup> Tank Bd. (Gen. W. O.L.O'Carroll)32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Bd (Gen. A.L. Willison)

Troops and services of the Army Corp

30<sup>th</sup> Army Corp (Gen. W.M. Norrie) with:1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. (Gen. H. Lumsden):2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. (Gen. R. Briggs)22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. (Gen. W.G. Carr)201<sup>st</sup> Guards Mot. Bd. (Gen. J .C.O. Marriott)7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. (Gen. F. W. Messervy):4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. (Gen. G. W. Richards)7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. (Gen. J.M.L. Renton)3<sup>rd</sup> Mot. Bd. Indian (Gen. A.E. Filose)29<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. Indian (Gen. D. Reid)1<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bd. Free France (Gen. P. Koenig)

Troops and services of the Army Corp

5<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. Indian (Gen. H.R. Briggs):10<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. Indian (Gen. C.H. Boucher)2<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd. Free France (Gen. Cazaud)Earmarked to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army:10<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. Indian (Gen. T. W. Res)11<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. Indian (Gen. A.A. Anderson)1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Bd. (Gen. F. Brown)

Troops and services of the Army

There are sure signs of an opponent on the zone of Sidi Brehisc-Alam Hamza and main stress can of course be exercised here. But it will be an expensive operation and difficult for him because our minefields were extended and our position firmly, well supported by artillery and well entrenched. Choose any direction, our best card resides on the counter-attack with tanks to destroy it. We are ready for this (...), the soil carefully studied and I'm sure our units are prepared to intervene in the South or Northwest (...).

3. Yesterday I spent the whole day with Norrie to study the terrain and the location of the battle, after a conference with Strafer [= Gott] to coordinate the activities of its various armored columns into the battle. I would have done everything the day before but I preferred to postpone taking account of the visit of Corbett. I am absolutely convinced that a opposing armor force that wandered into this arena you would expose to fight under conditions of inferiority and heavy we would offer any chance of destroying it completely”<sup>(22)</sup>.

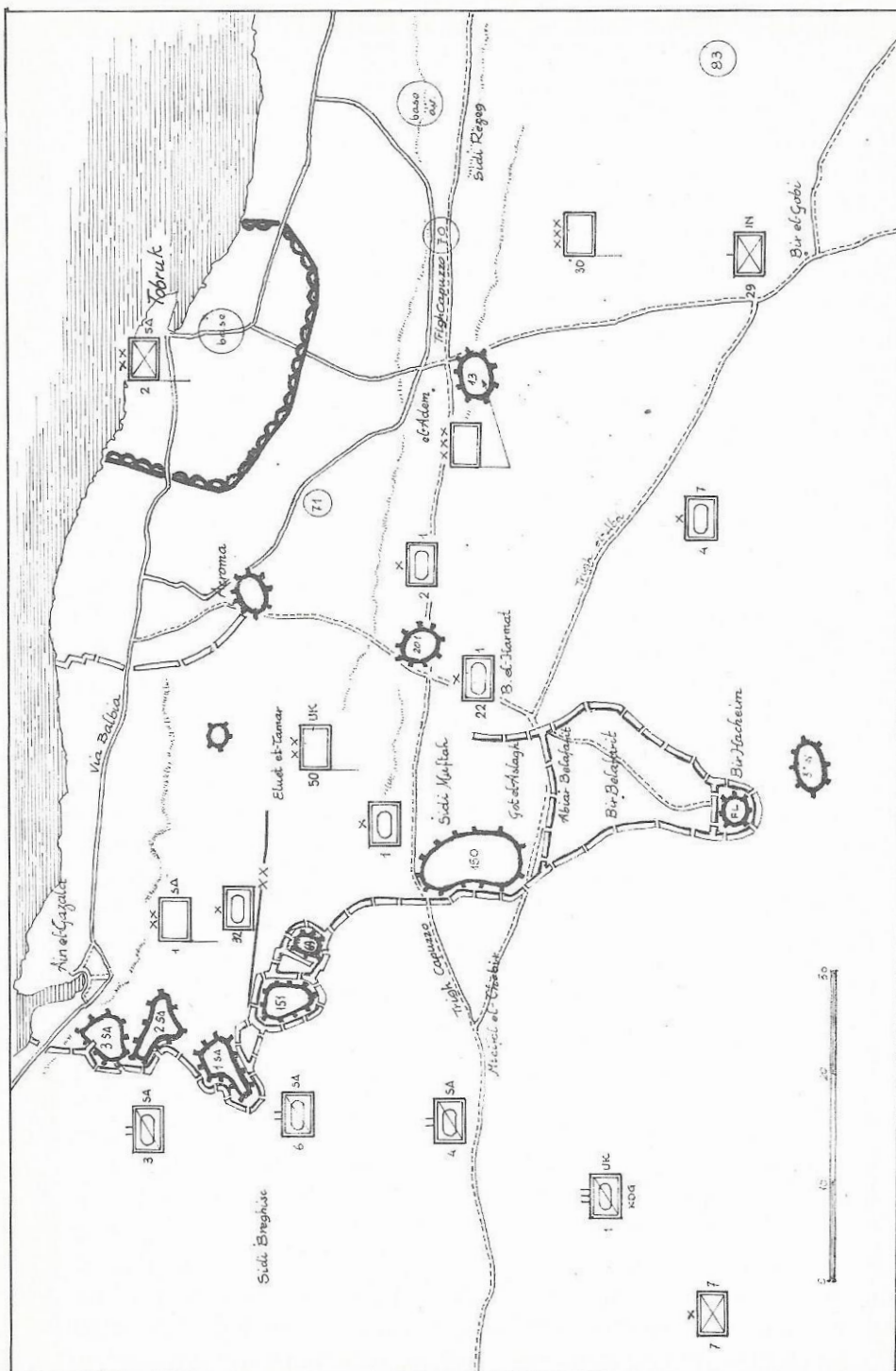
According to Gen. Messervy, Ritchie was "*confident and determined in public, but gave the impression of not being equally confident and decided in private*"<sup>(23)</sup>, however before you discuss the goodness of the deployment, see fundamental lines will agree (sketch No. 24).

The 13<sup>th</sup> Corp of Godwin-Austen had a responsibility in the sector between the sea and Trigh el Abd. More precisely, from the coast to Alam Hamza, i.e. for a stretch of 25 miles, were the troops of the 1st South African Inf. Div.: the 3rd Brigade on the roadside of the via Balbia Ridge, the 2nd alongside the track for Acroma, 1<sup>st</sup> at Alam Hamza. On the rear was available the 32nd tank Brigade, in reinforcement. Followed the 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. supported a British semicircle of about fifty kilometers with the concavity in the West. In contrast to the South Africans, whose device you could consider sufficiently compact, the 50th Inf. Div had two brigades to the South-East of Alam Hamza-the 151<sup>st</sup> and 69<sup>th</sup> -almost meets the elbow; then began an extensive curtain wall protected by irregular minefields; then, between the Trigh Capuzzo and el-Abd, there was the 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade, firmly placed at Got el-Ualeb but isolated. Behind the three British brigades stood the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Brigade, in reserve.

South of the Trigh el-Abd began the field of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp, in which the only static structure advanced was the stronghold of Bir Hakeim, entrusted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Free France Brigade. Between Got el-Ualeb and Bir Hakeim ran about thirty kilometers of unattended minefields. Ever so far had been placed in minefields so great proportions, although large curtains were left defenseless. In addition, five regiments of armored cars had been tasked with patrolling the no-man's land and also to prevent the axis elements

LO SCHIERAMENTO DELL'8<sup>a</sup> ARMATA IL 25 MAGGIO

Schizzo n. 24



identifying front margins of minefields. It was 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> South African armored car Regiment of 1<sup>st</sup> King's Dragoon Guards and the 12<sup>th</sup> Lancers.

Norrie divisions were partly diluted between Segnali Nord and Bir el Gobi, essentially attempting to oppose the flanking (the 7th Arm. Div.), and partly collected between Bir el Harmat and Bir Lefa to oppose an attempt to breakthrough along the Trigh Capuzzo on the Trigh el Abd (1st Arm. Div). Gen. Messervy, Commander of the 7th Arm. Div. He employed by several units: the 7th Motorized Brigade (ex-support group) West of Bir Hakeim. the 1<sup>st</sup> French brigade at Bir Hakeim. the 3rd Indian motor Brigade at hill 171, a few kilometres south-east of Bir Hakeim; the 4th Armored Brigade, only Armored unit of the Division, near Trigh el-Abd; the 29th Indian Brigade at Bir el Gobi. As soon as they sighted the columns of the Axis, it was expected that the 7th Motorized Brigade prepared position now replicates of Retma, thus making it less interspersed waiting location of large unit.

Instead Gen. Lumsden, Commander of the 1st Arm. Div., had the 22nd Armored Brigade at Bir-el Harmat, the 2nd Armored Brigade on the Trigh Capuzzo and 201<sup>st</sup> Motorized Brigade of the Guards (new name taken by a brigade of the 200<sup>th</sup> Guards) deployed a stronghold near the junction of the Bir Hakeim- Acroma and Trigh Capuzzo. The location was called *Knightsbridge* and will play an important role in the upcoming battle.

On the rear of the line there were three small strongholds: one by el-Adem, with the command of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp; a second at Acroma, which, besides, the support of a minefield at the barrier via Balbia; the third at hill 209 (West of Acroma), called *Commonwealth Keep*.

Finally, the garrison of Tobruk was composed by the 2nd South African Inf. Div. with the 4th and 6th South African Brigade and 9th Indian Brigade. The Division had also deployed two battle groups-*Stopcol* and *Seacol*-in the coastal strip to the East of Gazala and the escarpment West of Acroma, in anti-invasion function from the sea and the sky. Farther east, near Gambut, were the Advanced Command of the 8th Indian Brigade.

We can therefore say that the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. was able to cope with a breakthrough or North Central as a flanking from the South; but the 7th Arm. Div. could just talk against the winding (albeit with an initial location that everything was except collection): a timely shift towards the North was clearly delusional.



Not that the incident had escaped the commanders concerned to Ritchie first. Given that a certain weight was exercised by the convenience that armored forces were never too far from infantry brigades (a memento of fate happened to the 5th South African Infantry Brigade and the New Zealanders during operation *Crusader*), it was calculated that a breakthrough in the center of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp would find at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Brigade and granted time to rush the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. If instead the breakthrough had happened at the Trigh Capuzzo, what all things considered more likely to the lower density of minefields and screen the defenseless North of Trigh, intervention of the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade and of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. It would have been quickly and even the 4th Armored Brigade would not find it very difficult to overcome the 25 km that separated it from 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. Finally, if Rommel had decided the flanking, the distance to be overcome (eighty kilometers from Segnali Nord and Bir Hakeim and another fifty until el-Adem) and the need for refueling would allow the action of the 4th Armored Brigade, as well as the arrival of the 22nd Armored Brigade at least, if not the entire 1st Arm. Div.

Truth be told, the Gen. Lumsden was very conducive to cede the battle to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade to Messervy, partly because between the two ran bad blood since the retreat from el Agheila, both because the only 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade had many *Grant* it had altogether the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>. Therefore he argued vigorously the greater danger arising from a central breakthrough and the consequent need to take the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm Div. well in hand, giving little attention to the hypothesis of the flanking from the South<sup>(24)</sup>.

Knowing the specific ideas and recommendations of Auchinleck, one must assume that he has accepted the situation based on a misunderstanding:

“(...) I am fully satisfied-he replied on 23 May to Ritchie's letter cited that same day about the preparations for the battle of location of the armored divisions and I'm glad to see that we are of the same order of ideas; This is always a comfort!”.

According to the schedule made by the Air Ministry in July 1941, the *Royal Air Force* in the Middle East would reach 62 combat squadrons [= groups] in March 1942. Subsequently, in December 1941, the requirement was raised to 85 groups, later reduced to 80, to be achieved in August 1942. In fact, despite the attrition, the loss and transfers to Malta or to the far East, there came a lot than expected. In particular, the *Western*

*Desert Air Force* in the wake of Rommel's offensive had the following units of fighters and bomber:

- a group of fighter-bombers at Amiriya with *Blenheim IV*
- two bomber groups at Baheira with *Boston III*
- a bomber group at Baheira with *Baltimores*
- two groups fighters at Gambut with *Tomahawk*
- six fighters groups Gambut with *Kittyhawk I*
- three groups fighters at Gambut with *Hurricane*
- a fighters group at Gambut with *Spitfire VB*
- a group fighters at el-Adem with *Hurricane*

In total it was 384 fighters and 160 bombers of various types.

They were, however, available in reinforcement, although not under the authority of the *Western Desert Air Force* Command:

- five bombers groups in el-Daba with *Wellington*
- a bomber group at Maaten Baggusch with *Wellington*.

Great importance was also attributed to air traffic control, by radio communications, radar coverage, to pilot training and practice bombing run up to 5,000 meters, instead of the usual 2,500-3,000 meters. Air-ground co-operation, however, there were substantial changes: the procedures already adopted proved valid, apart from the difficult issue of the recognition of the troops from the sky.

In conclusion, the eighth army had at 850 tanks, plus another 120 ready to intervene against the alleged 550 Axis tanks, of which 200-250 Italians, with a ratio of 3 to 2. The superiority in artillery was about 2 to 1 and 1 to 1.5 aircraft. Auchinleck comment:

"I was pleased that the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had sufficient infantry to tackle any possible situation that arose; more likely would be infantry of hindrance. But I would have liked to have more campaign artillery because there were no reserves guns available of the two commanders or the for Ritchie (...).

It is not easy to make a proper comparison of enemy armored forces and our. Numerically the 8<sup>th</sup> Army undoubtedly enjoyed a considerable superiority, but our infantry tanks were too slow to engage in combat against the enemy medium tanks, and, despite we had in keeping a significant number of Americans medium *General Grant* tanks, our tanks were still lower in the power of the guns and mechanical reliability compared to your opponent (...)"<sup>(25)</sup>.

The inferiority Auchinleck beckoned was sharply disputed. The 2-pound piece that equipped the *Crusader*, *Valentine* and *Matilda* had a higher penetration of 50% compared to that of 50 short of the Pzkw III, which constituted the bulk of German tanks. The 37-piece of Stuart had also improved penetration ability, swinging from 15 to 30%. It is true that the *Afrikakorps* had nineteen Pzkw III (J) *Special* with a 50-piece long, much higher, but for the British there were 167 *Grant* with 75 mm gun, unrivaled at the beginning of the battle because the only four Pzkw IV *Special* had no ammunition.

As for the armor, the comparison was all in favor of British infantry tanks and *Grant*:

“In essence-Liddell Hart concluded in his comparative examination-British tanks had a basic qualitative advantage (besides a large quantitative superiority) on German tanks. But the starting advantage was diminished, if not exactly balanced against a number of other factors” (26).

Other factors were represented by less rapid pointing, less availability of munitions, greater tendency to catch fire and minor operating regularity.

Anti-tank pieces also can not say that the 8th Army was at fault: had 112 new 8 pound cannons\* (exceeding 50-piece German) against only 48 guns of 88, excellent and unsurpassed but a bit too visible. And yet to say that Rommel was receiving the first Soviet 76 pieces.

## 2. THE PARTIAL FAILURE OF THE «VENICE» VARIANT

The May 25 on Jan. Crüwell had contacted Navarini and Gioda, since then under his command. Now the Organization was up and there were no uncertainties. At 14:00 of the 26<sup>th</sup> *Panzerarmee* began moving forward.

To the North the XXI and the X Corps left the basics of departure preceded by a massive aerial bombardment. Not met that a weak reaction of artillery. The 3rd Recon Battalion and the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Armored Car Regiment were limited to observing and found shelter on its position of strength. On the front of the XXI Corps operated a battalion of the 21st Panzer division; in front of the X the acted X battalion for the *Ariete* and a armored car company of the VII Bersaglieri battalion were the armor of the *Trieste*. The 16 divisions overcame the first-line terminating; between 18:00 and 20:00

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\*typo 6 pounders

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE PANZERARMEE AFRIKA  
as of May 26, 1942

Commander of *Panzerarmee Afrika* (Gen. E. Rommel)

X Corps (Gen. N. Gioda) with:

*Brescia* Inf. Div. (Gen. G. Lombardi)

*Pavia* Inf. Div (Gen. A. Torriano)

Troops and Services of the Army Corps:

XX Corps (Gen. E. Baldassarre) with:

*Trieste* Mot. Div. (Gen. A. Azzi)

*Ariete* Arm. Div. (Gen. G. De Stefanis)

Troops and Services of the Army Corps

XXI Corps (Gen. E. E. Navarini) with:

*Trento* Inf. Div (Gen. C. Gotti)

*Sabrattha* Inf. Div (Gen. M. Soldarelli)

15th *Schutzen* Bd. (Col. Menny)

Troops and Services of the Army Corps

*Deutsches Afrikakorps* (Gen. W. Nehring) with:

15th *Panzerdivision* (Gen. G. von Vaerst)

21st *Panzerdivision* (Gen. G. von Bismarck)

Troops and Services of the Army Corps

90th Light Division (less 15<sup>th</sup> Bd.) (Gen. U. Kleemann)

104<sup>th</sup> artillery command

Italian artillery command (Gen. Nicolini)

*Hecker* Battlegroup

Troops and Services of the Army

some achieved the objectives of day, alignment Gasr el Ambar-Bir Bu Usceica (sketch No. 25). Only then the armored units returned to their respective divisions, which-contrary to what is expected-were able to reach between 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning.

Further south the armored and motorized ground had begun to gather for the big winding. Before getting to the heart of events seems appropriate to dwell on the *Ariete* and *Trieste* divisions and constituting the XXI Corp and unique large Italian units capable of dealing with the mechanized war, albeit with inadequate resources and materials. “*Even the two weak Italian divisions-said Rommel-for their poor weaponry could be used only under German protection*”<sup>(27)</sup> and “with the aid”, rather than “*under protection*”, it would have been probably more objective and certainly more generous.

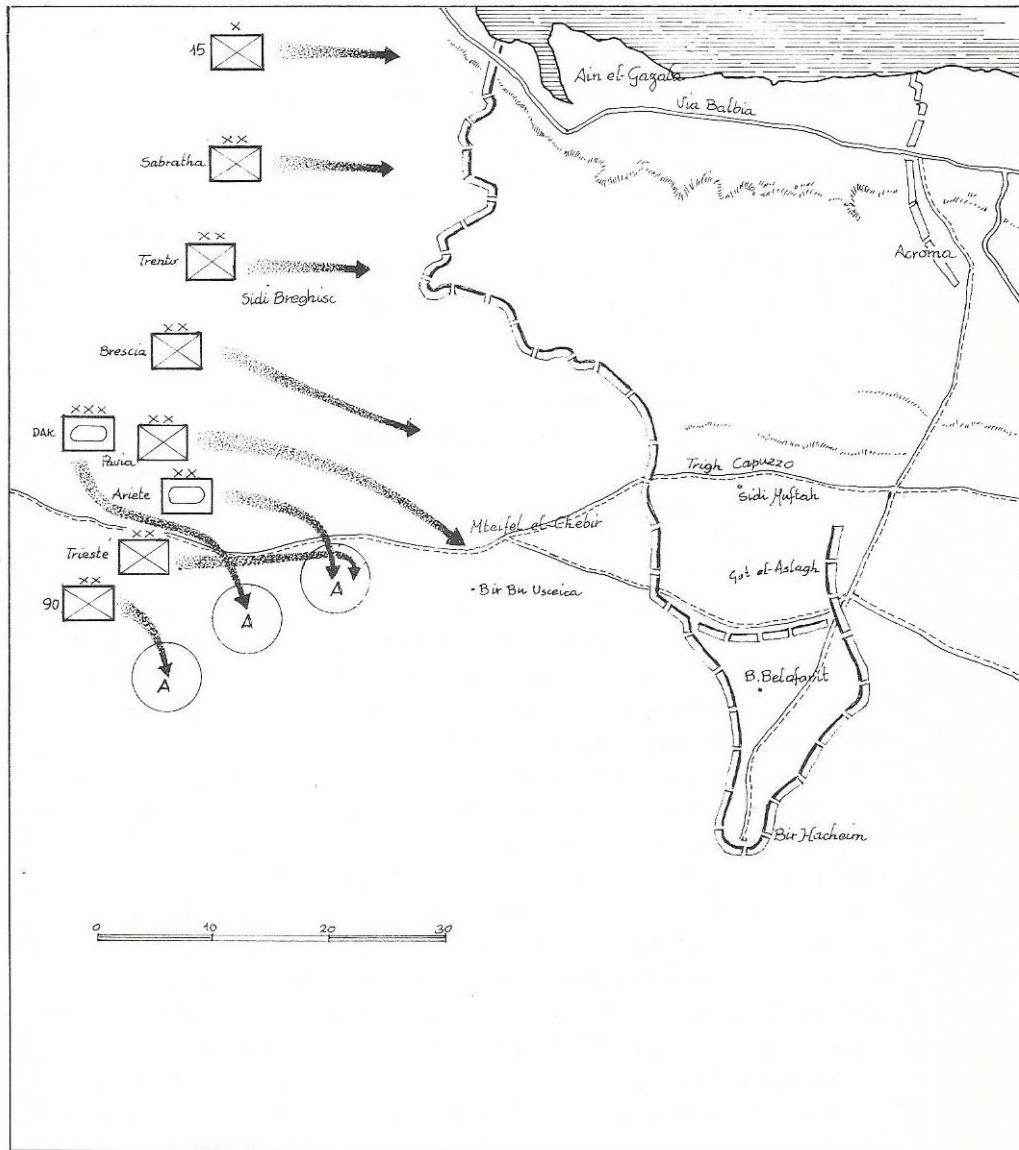
The *Ariete* had been returned to full staff. The 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank Regiment, dissolved the partially destroyed VII battalion remained with the VIII and IX with M 13/40, also were very painfully reduced. It was complete, but, taking into account the conditions under which poured the other units, it invested the entire Division. Rebuild it or replace it? For the first solution to tap into what was coming on stream from Italy, including units of the *Littorio* Arm. Div., obviously the more ready; for the second, it was necessary to wait until the entire *Littorio* had landed in Tripoli. Of course, each alternative presented the pros and cons. At first they tried not to touch the *Littorio*, so that they would have a second Armored Division, brand-new, supporting the best the *Ariete* by sending bulk means and accessories. Soon, however, the needs of the counter-offensive and the insistence of Rommel advised to tap into the *Littorio* to bring to full efficiency the *Ariete*, which by now had acquired a large experience in the desert war. Also, the X battalion M. 14 was passed to the *Ariete* and the XI battalion M. 13 to the *Trieste*.

In May the 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank, under the command of Leut.Col. Maretti-an officer who had shown qualities of a highly respected Commander, notably at Bir el Gobi, at the start of operation *Crusader*-counts 172 tanks: 52 tanks per battalion plus a platoon of six tanks, under the command of the Regiment, as well as a tank without turret for the commander of the regiment<sup>(28)</sup>. The 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiment had the V and XII Battalion truck portable and the V Anti-tank Battalion. The artillery of *Ariete* formed a notable complex. They included 132<sup>nd</sup> artillery (two groups of 75/27-06, one from 105/28 and one

The beginning of the Italian-German offensive (May 26)

L'INIZIO DELL'OFFENSIVA ITALO-TEDESCA  
(26 maggio)

Schizzo n. 25



auto-cannon of 90/53 and numerous groups of reinforcement: the II/24<sup>th</sup> 105/28 artillery (to complete the staffing level of the regiment), the DLI and DLII semovente group 75/18, all with three batteries, as well as the V/10 anti-aircraft and anti-tank artillery with two batteries of the splendid German 88/56.

The two self-propelled units (each 10 semoventi, first real self-propelled artillery) had just been prepared. Had H.E. rounds and were also the E.P. armor-piercing rounds. The charge was unique and the maximum range was about eight kilometers. The autonomy reached the 200 kilometers by road and ten hours on varied terrain. Maximum speed of 32 km/h. Accompanying action were decentralized to batteries battalions, holding tanks on the wings and in the intervals, and acting on the initiative of the usually head-piece against enemy tanks (maximum 1500 meters distance) and against anti-tank fire centers. For action to stop, using anti-tank per battery or per group. For the accompaniment and support to the infantry, as distant action, were worth the normal criteria for use as field artillery.

With 88/56 pieces sold in small numbers from Germany in the summer of 1940, were immediately formed two groups (the XVIII and XXIX), started in Libya as anti-aircraft units after a short training course. For most of the 1941 remained in Tripoli; then, in November, the XVIII group was motorized and brought online. In early 1942, in the context of the reorganization of the artillery regiments of the Division changed its name to V group A/T and A/A of 1<sup>st</sup> rapid artillery of the *Brescia*. A little later came into the 132<sup>nd</sup> artillery reinforcement of *Ariete*.

Other two divisional units deserve a mention: the IV Group *Lancieri di Novara* with L/6 tanks, with two companies, and the III group *Nizza Cavalleria* armored car with two squadrons. The first was equipped with 40 light tanks of 6 tons with a 20 mm gun and a 8 mm machine gun in the turret. The medium was also, in its time, designed for mountain warfare and, as now used in reconnaissance duties, now appears too modest as armament and performance. The second was provided by 40 AB 41 armored cars, armed with a 20 mm gun and two machine guns of 8 mm, with 400 km of autonomy and a road speed of 80 kilometers per hour. It was a good performance, but quite complicated and difficult to maintain.

Also the *Trieste* had been re-regulated. Its infantry regiments (each with regimental Command, a mortar company

of 81mm and two infantry battalions) were in truth very slim (one thousand men each), but the availability of fire and armored vehicles were a efficient whole. The 21<sup>st</sup> artillery had two 100/17 groups, two from 75/27 and one from 75/50 (with one battery), and two groups of the 8<sup>th</sup> artillery of the Army in reinforcement: one of 149/28 and one of 149/40.

As for the logistic organization of the XX Corps, it retained the bases of large units in the location in place: those of the Corps and *Trieste* to the East of Martuba near the via Balbia, *Ariete* and East of Umm er- Rzem. Each Division would bring only the indispensable. Supplies and vacate by the same Division on formation of the Intendenza, that had implanted a sorting hospital with 200 beds, at Umm er- Rzem and stock fractions of various amenities at Derna and Sidi Hussein (Southeast of Martuba). In the event of urgent or significant supply needs, requests, through the Corps-were answered at home by means of the Intendenza. The amenities were provided for in the following sizes: 5 days food; 3 water days, plus one with the units; 2 *unfoc*\* for the Divisional artillery, one for the midrange calibers, two for anti-aircraft and anti-tank pieces and 1/4 for infantry weapons.

The XX Corps left the collection areas at 14:00 of 26 May. Gen. Baldassarre was leaving with 228 tanks, 78 armored cars and 18 semoventi. At first everything went well. In parallel columns the *Ariete* and *Trieste* advanced north of the Trigh Capuzzo rejecting easily the few enemy recon elements and stayed parked in secure positions indicated as C and D (sketch No. 26) until dusk, then gathered in area A more or less simultaneously. The DAK was met in your area A. crossed the pillars of XX Corps and given some way but, all in all, the machine had moved with precision.

At 18:15 the command of the XX Corp received from the conventional message *Venice* from the *Panzerarmee*, which immediately sent out the divisions by officers.

Unknown when exactly it was delivered to the *Ariete*; the fact is that the historical diary of this report: “19:00 hours: *The Division resumed its March towards the zone B (South-East of Bir Hakeim) with route 37 km at 142° and 12 km at 82°*”. To be exact, at 19:00 the Division left the position C to enter zone A. Add that at that time probably took the disposition «for wing » that took in

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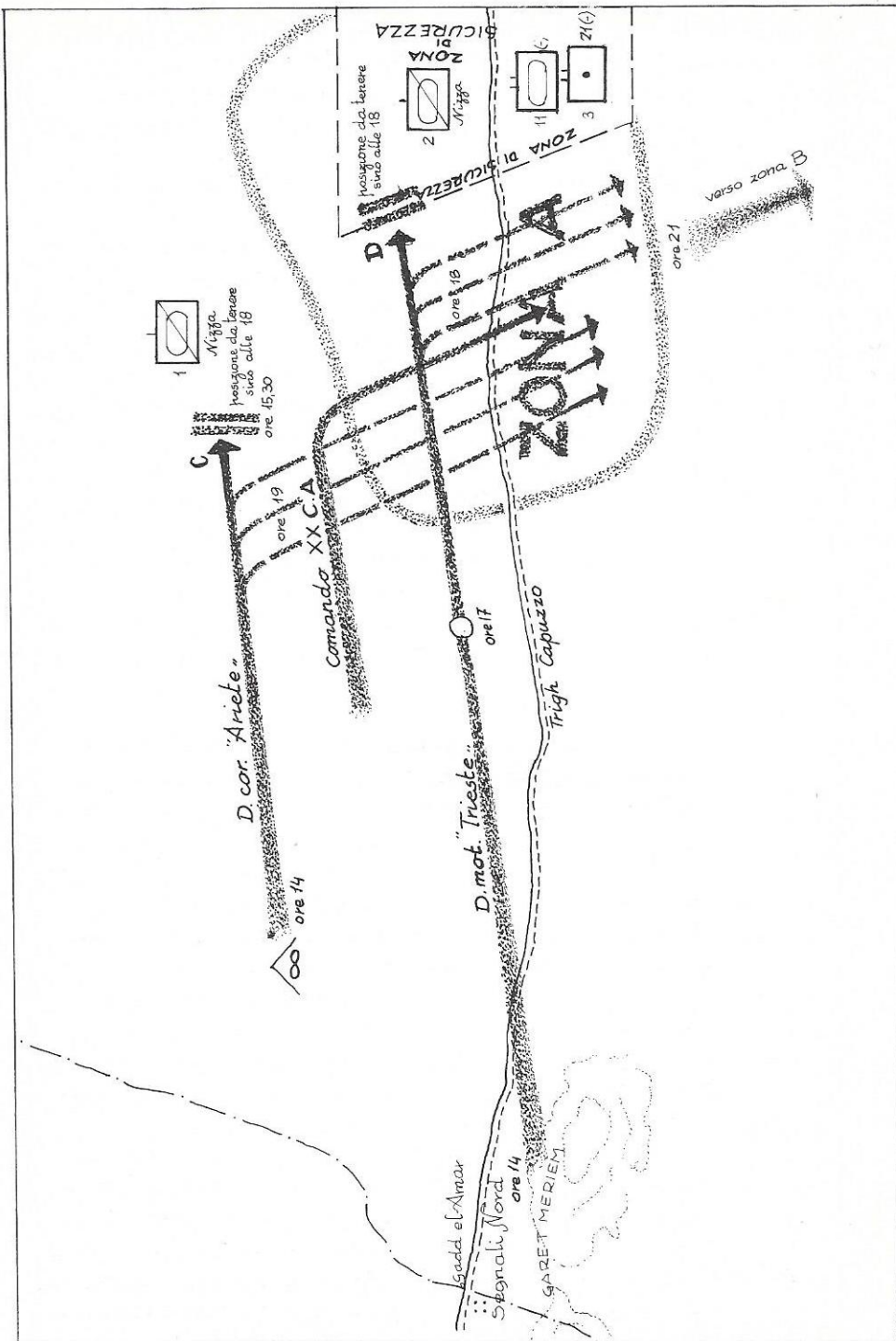
\* units of fire (not sure how much ammo this is, but suspect it varies by unit type)



. Movement of XX Corps to reach the zone A (26 May)

MOVIMENTO DEL XX CORPO PER RAGGIUNGERE  
LA ZONA A  
(26 maggio)

Schizzo n. 26



march to the zone B. Thus, to decrease the depth as much as possible, each Division would comprise multiple columns up to saturate the amplitude of movement (about three kilometers). Tactical link with the DAK was entrusted to the *Ariete*.

As regards the *Trieste*, the order received at 20:30, i.e. two hours after its posting, and it could be delivered in time to sub-units. At 21:00 the 65<sup>th</sup> infantry, followed by artillery and infantry, 66<sup>th</sup> began marching in two columns according to the route provided by original order. The second part of the Division-command of large units, services and trucks-the direction taken on the case of *Venice*. Azzi personally rushed forward on the trail of his regiments, but after searches in vain eventually relented: "*the General Commander-wrote in the historical diary – (...) misses the 65th Inf. regt. and the two columns [recte: both sides, advanced and behind, the Division] marches as well into the night, with divergent routes.*"

How can we explain this setback? On 25 May the XX Corps had three documents for the divisions sent to him by the *Panzerarmee*: document F "provisions for the disseminated for the current deployment areas, for deployment in the area and for the movement towards zone B", document G "for the tanks of X Corp" and H "variant *Venice*" document.

The document F, based on the order of operations Army Corps of 20 May, indicated the following route from zone A to zone B: 27 km per azimuth 132° -7 km per azimuth 63° - 15 km per azimuth 26° -9 km per azimuth 347°. Document H, for *Venice*, it contained an indication of the new zone B, the new route (37 km per azimuth 142° -12 km per azimuth 62° -15 km per azimuth 29° -25 km per azimuth 336°), the tasks of exploring, the time of departure from zone B (04:30 hours of day x + 1) and the advanced deployment of the Corps (equal to that provided by the initial order).

The *Trieste*, received at 01:00 of the 26<sup>th</sup> notice that it was day x, sent out its operation order No. 1 "following and confirmation verbal orders" given from Azzi in the afternoon before. Though slightly modified the designation of the area B, stating with a sketch that was represented by an area located with base (el-Abiad) four kilometers west of Bir Hakeim and a front of about ten kilometers (from el-Abiad northwards). It was still in the area B laid down initial order. For movement from A to B area called the route prescribed by F and document for the variant *Venice* sent full copy of document H. The order of operations

it was sent, for information, to the command of XX Corps and the *Ariete* <sup>(29)</sup>.

The *Ariete* instead aired, for the part of competence, only document F <sup>(30)</sup>. H document there is no trace, however the established route to go from zone A to zone B was “37 km for azimuth 142°-12 km for azimuth 82°”, i.e. the first two route directions for *Venice*. This order was sent, for information, to the XX Corps and the *Trieste*, without-it should detect it-neither surprise nor arouse questions.

Nothing exists that helps to explain this difference in behavior between the two division commanders. It was stated that Rommel had to communicate the conventional Word *Venice* in the late afternoon, after finding that the action of the XXI and the X Corps, overly diluted on a wide front, had induced the enemy armored forces to have changed position <sup>(31)</sup>. But the argument did not persuade, though based on the order of operation of 20 May for Rommel's tanks:

“If the situation at the evening of day X requires an additional boost of power to the South and East after moving from zone A, will force the hypothesis *Venice*”.

Firstly, a decision so crucial importance could not be taken at the very last moment, basing it on the enemy's reactions to an advanced in no man's land, even before it was established contact with the British resistance. Who could reasonably hope that Ritchie changed location at the first sign of the Italian-German forces? Only the day  $x + 1$  could be illuminating:

“I was in a State of great tension-confess indeed Rommel-expected with impatience the next day. What will the enemy? What he has done? These questions went through my mind. The next day would bring the solution” <sup>(32)</sup>.

Secondly, it is true that the XX Corps was ordered to apply this case *Venice* at 18:15, but it is equally true that the 21st *Panzerdivision* was advised by DAK up from 14:00 <sup>(33)</sup>. On affirmation of Rommel, then: “At 20.30 [of the 26<sup>th</sup>] was that I ordered case *Venice*” <sup>(34)</sup> you can pass it over, since this is obviously sentence for effect.

Therefore, he is duped into believing that the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup> Rommel had anticipated-in relation to the Corps commands and Division, who were last in the afternoon, in turn, called

regimental commanders-his decision in favor of variant *Venice* (as surely advanced notice that the next day was day x), urging however, as often happens, to await the formal executive order. Rommel was most likely prefer the variant, also because it ensured no surprise that, as far as relevant, it was never granted by the initial plan. It was not conceivable to overcome momentum the minefields identified North of Bir Hakeim, and this would be translated in time given to Ritchie for the parry and counterattack.

The morning of the 26<sup>th</sup>, received the official communication about the day x, it is plausible that De Stefanis has given for granted the change to plan and then given the Executive orders for *Venice*; and that, conversely, Azzi has kept to a more rigid formal compliance policy (by analogy, for that matter, under the command of XX Corps) and has complied with the original order, leaving the *Venice* stage of events. This seems the only acceptable explanation, as supported by the fact that Baldassarre never moves any objection to the order of De Stefanis, despite having had ample opportunity throughout the day of the 26<sup>th</sup>.

But what leaves most dumbfounded is the find that Baldassarre was apparently kept unaware of what was happening. In the historical diary of the XX Corp reads:

“At 21:00 of the 26<sup>th</sup> to start the movement from zone A to zone B. It appears that the breadth of the face of the Corps is excessive for a night ride. The *Ariete*, to maintain contact with the C.T.A. [= DAK], must tighten away right so from the *Trieste*; even the latter (marching in two columns) pulls to the right, but not sufficiently. The movement continues until 02:00 of the 27<sup>th</sup>.

Reached the B zone, South of Bir Hakeim, and while the units gathered, Baldassarre wanted to see the situation. Continues the historical diary of the Corps:

“Contact is made by patrols with both divisions. From that hour [= shortly after night 02:00] is lost all connection with the *Trieste*. The command of the Corps closed in therefore towards the *Ariete*, continuing to send patrols, looking in vain for the *Trieste*”

Then, would quiet severe Azzi mistake not only on his experience (21:00 of the 26<sup>th</sup>), but also once I arrive in zone B (02-03:00 hours of the 27<sup>th</sup>). Only in the late morning (11.30 a.m.) will he alive in person to Corps Command and “*announced that the head of the Division were unable to receive the word Venice, and therefore,*

according to the expected plan, are removed North of Bir Hakeim ".<sup>(35)</sup>

Now, the organization of Italian connections (as) offered unreliability was unfortunately an unpleasant reality, but its very difficult to justify what happened to *Trieste*: there are things that should not happen and the loss of divisional contact on May 26 was just one of those. Since the war is rich in all kinds of unexpected, we will say that the mistake and the consequent failure of the direction of *Trieste* at that time will prove providential to the tide of the battle.

## MAY 27

At 4.30 a.m. in the morning the XXI and the X Corps resumed the advance. The progression was slow due to the strong interdiction shooting nearby, which resulted in losses of sensitive men and vehicles. Furthermore, the same trend of British resistance caused the separation of the two corps. The first was a partial initial success by the *Trento*, which was able to achieve their goals in the late morning. Moreover, the *Sabratha* and the German 15th Brigade found strong obstacle in intense fire and enemies recon elements action. However, the key issue was to ascertain if the opponent had or had not intention to withdraw. For this purpose, Crüwell ordered at 18:00 the 15th Brigade to simulate a vigorous attack on the via Balbia, but derived little. At dusk the *Sabratha* and the German unit touched the objectives and the whole line stopped.

The X Corps, on the other hand, encountered other difficulties. Heading towards the Southeast, slid under the great bend described by Alam Hamza's position, so he had to look the *Brescia* and *Pavia* than the South. On both sides there was emptiness.

The departure of the march from A wing was full of feeling and meaning. Set in motion the ten thousand wheeled and tracked vehicles. We can only give the floor to Col. Mancinelli, who followed Rommel:

"The next night marched the whole mechanized (two armored divisions and a German motorized, and motorized two recon groups a Italian and a German<sup>(36)</sup> autonomous grouping) to zone B is certainly as an indelible memory for those who participated and is without a doubt one of the most brilliant of the last war. Thousands and thousands of powerful machines advancing regularly to lights

off in the clear night of full moon, along a route marked by the ideal compass needle, compact formation, like a gigantic block pushed a higher force irresistibly mysterious on the endless white desert plain. The vast vault of heaven was full of deep rumble of the engines and the ground seemed to radiate to infinity the thrill of thousands and thousands of steel giants in march towards the battle, while the hunt watched, crossing incessantly over the column. For an odd contrast one had the impression of being enveloped by the silence and spoke softly, almost to prevent that the enemy could hear the sound of our voice”<sup>(37)</sup>.

There was also the feeling of a rapprochement made without the knowledge of the enemy. The war diary of the *Afrikakorps* registers:

“In the moonlight the DAK runs towards the enemy. The morale is superb and everyone is tense in expectation of the first clash with the English. At midnight there are reports about the presence of the opponent, neither our troops to the right [= the 90<sup>th</sup> Light] nor those on our left [= XX Corp] had any contact with the enemy.”

But it was an illusion. British air reconnaissance and armored cars screen of the 4<sup>th</sup> South African Regiment had spotted the movement of XX Corps and the DAK to area since 16:00, although they had to simply communicate the concentration of a significant mass of vehicles. When, at 21:00, resumed the march to reach the area B, the South African armored cars and patrols of the 2nd Battalion King's Royal Rifle Corps gave information, while being unable-for both the darkness and because it spread further South-to evaluate with some approximation of the size of the columns.

The 7th Motorized Brigade (Gen. Renton), which as we know, was rather scattered West of Bir Hakeim, taken for good news and walked quickly to Retma. Command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, however, remained somewhat skeptical about such a big Italian-German movement southward, especially since the messages were from a unit which was withdrawn at night, so Messervy wished to see more clearly in the situation. This distrust Renton warned the symptoms and thought to have provoked the impression of being “*a little too extract panic in the report of the enemy's advance: in fact they were all* [= the higher commands] *convinced that the attack would come from the North*”<sup>(38)</sup>.

To be true, Messervy transmitted the message of Renton to 30<sup>th</sup> Corp “*asking permission to take combat positions foreseen in case of attack on the left flank. But permission was denied to him*

by Norrie, who wanted to wait until it was known the direction of Rommel's main attack.” However, as a precautionary measure, Messervy at 02:00 warned, albeit very generically, the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade to keep ready to intervene at dawn. Incidentally, and to show how the slowness in the transmission of orders was widespread, the regiments of the Brigade received the notice between 02:30 and 04:30.

At 03:00 of 27 May to the mass of the Italian-German operation began to settle in Zone B and to refuel. At the first light of dawn the armored cars of the III *Nizza* group reported that off of Rugbet el-Atasc (sketch No. 27) was occupied by the enemy. Who exactly they were was not yet known. The only thing sure summary information provided concerning the existence of the 1st *France Libre* Brigade at Bir Hakeim, in addition to columns of the 7th Mot. Bd. floating in the area.

With the order of operations of 20 May Rommel had stated: "*the enemy that was located in the area of Bir Hakeim must be attacked and beaten*". This sentence was given to DAK, since according to the original plan to it was entrusted with the task of turning around the "target" consisting of Bir Hakeim. The adoption of *Venice* changed almost automatically the commitments of armored corps and would do well in command of the army to descend to any clarification on this, but the importance of French rather than underestimated strongpoint was literally passing.

Baldassarre, finding himself in front of that first unexpected obstacle, advised to eliminate it with what he had, namely *Ariete*, which then had recovered the X battalion, returning from X Corps. However, being aware of the opportunities for coordination with the DAK, for essentially the continuation of enveloping maneuver sought contact on his right: failed to get news of the *Afrikakorps*, but found the 21st *Panzerdivision*. The Jan. von Bismarck declared himself ready to go according to the timetable fixed by Nehring.

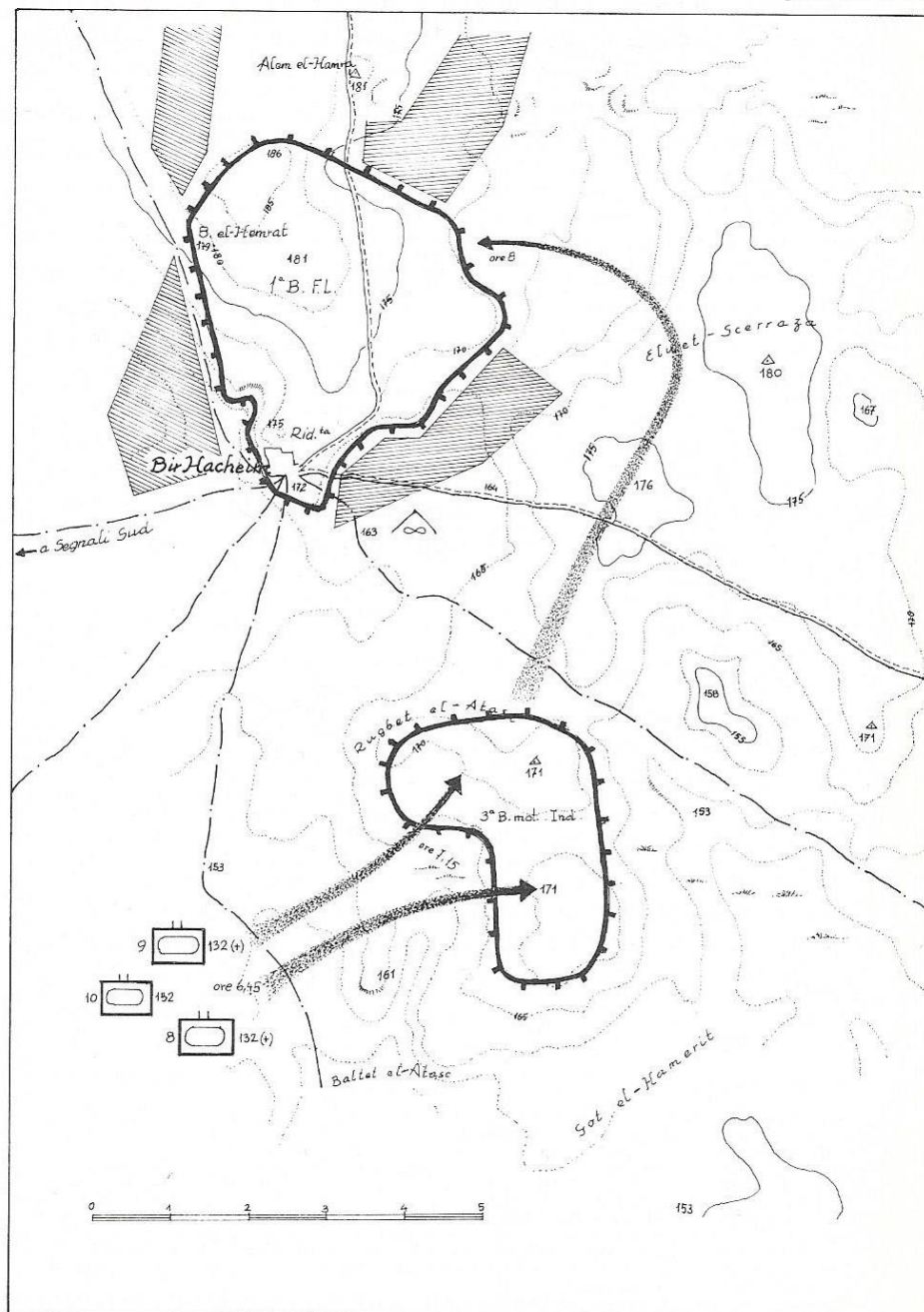
At around 06:40, therefore, the *Ariete*, already under fire of the artillery of the Indian 3rd Motorized Brigade of Gen Filose – for him, in fact, it was-, attacked the Rugbet-el-Atasc while the 21st *Panzer* was describing a semicircle northward, therefore not in any way involved in the fighting, as erroneously believed <sup>(39)</sup>.

The attachment included the VIII and the IX battalion in the first echelon, each strengthened by a group of 75/18 semovente, and the X battalion in the second echelon. Followed the V and then the XII Bersaglieri battalion.

The fighting of Rugbet el-Atasc and Bir Hacheim (May 27).,

I COMBATTIMENTI DI RUGBET EL-ATASC E  
DI BIR-HACHEIM  
(27 maggio)

Schizzo n. 27





Gen. Filose was on notice from the previous day's 20:00 but, although feeling in the silence of the night the distant engine noise was unable to develop precise ideas if 06:15, when the morning light allowed him to see a line of wagons at about 3,000 meters. The first radio communication to Messervy was very expressive: "*I have in front of an entire cursed German Armored Division!*"<sup>(40)</sup>. But the Germans were located further South and who it was going to destroy the Brigade was the *Ariete*.

The first wave of M. 13 wrapped around the perimeter of the stronghold on three sides exposed to the direction of attack of the IX battalion (left) and VIII had become mixed-in part for the development of land forms, in part because of the intense fire opened from 20 Indian field-artillery and in seven to eight hundred meters of range between the two battalions formed the Commander of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank had posted a company of the X battalion. The impact took place at 07:15, the line of resistance was quickly overwhelmed and the M. 13 and M. 14 tanks began to storm. Soon the 2 Pounder anti-tank pieces - 60 according<sup>(41)</sup> by some Indians, - 30 by others<sup>(42)</sup> were destroyed, the shaken and many defenders were prisoners.

Although victorious, the 8th and the 9th battalion soon found themselves embarrassed because, separated and with somewhat dispersed tanks, were unable to control the hundreds of Indians wandering on the battlefield, which, although surrendered, were beginning to recover with the morale and with weapons. Finally, around 08:00 the situation was unlocked by the arrival of the X battalion, whose Commander (Maj. Pinna) had assumed temporary command of the regiment. The long time of serious uncertainty was caused by an accident happened at 07.45 to Leut. Col. Maretti and then the resoling vacuum for twenty minutes in action of the regimental command<sup>(43)</sup>.

The second wave of thirty-five tanks<sup>(44)</sup>, followed at 10 by vehicles of the V and XII Bersaglieri Battalions, quickly ended the battle. Gen. Filose managed to disengage with the remnants of the Brigade.

The losses to the 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank and two semoventi groups around on thirty dead, 40 injured and some missing. The affected tanks were twenty three (almost all of the VII battalion), of which only fifteen that cannot be repaired on the spot.

Were captured over 1,000 prisoners, including the commanders of three cavalry regiments and ... an Admiral<sup>(45)</sup>. The enemy abandoned all pieces from 2 pounds, two batteries of 25 pounds and several tens of efficient vehicles.

The morning was therefore begun well; Unfortunately it was going to end with a bitter note. When Maj. Pinna came to Rugbet el -Atasc, immediately made contact with the VIII Battalion but was unable to do the same with IX. The battalion was gone neither giving sign of life via radio.

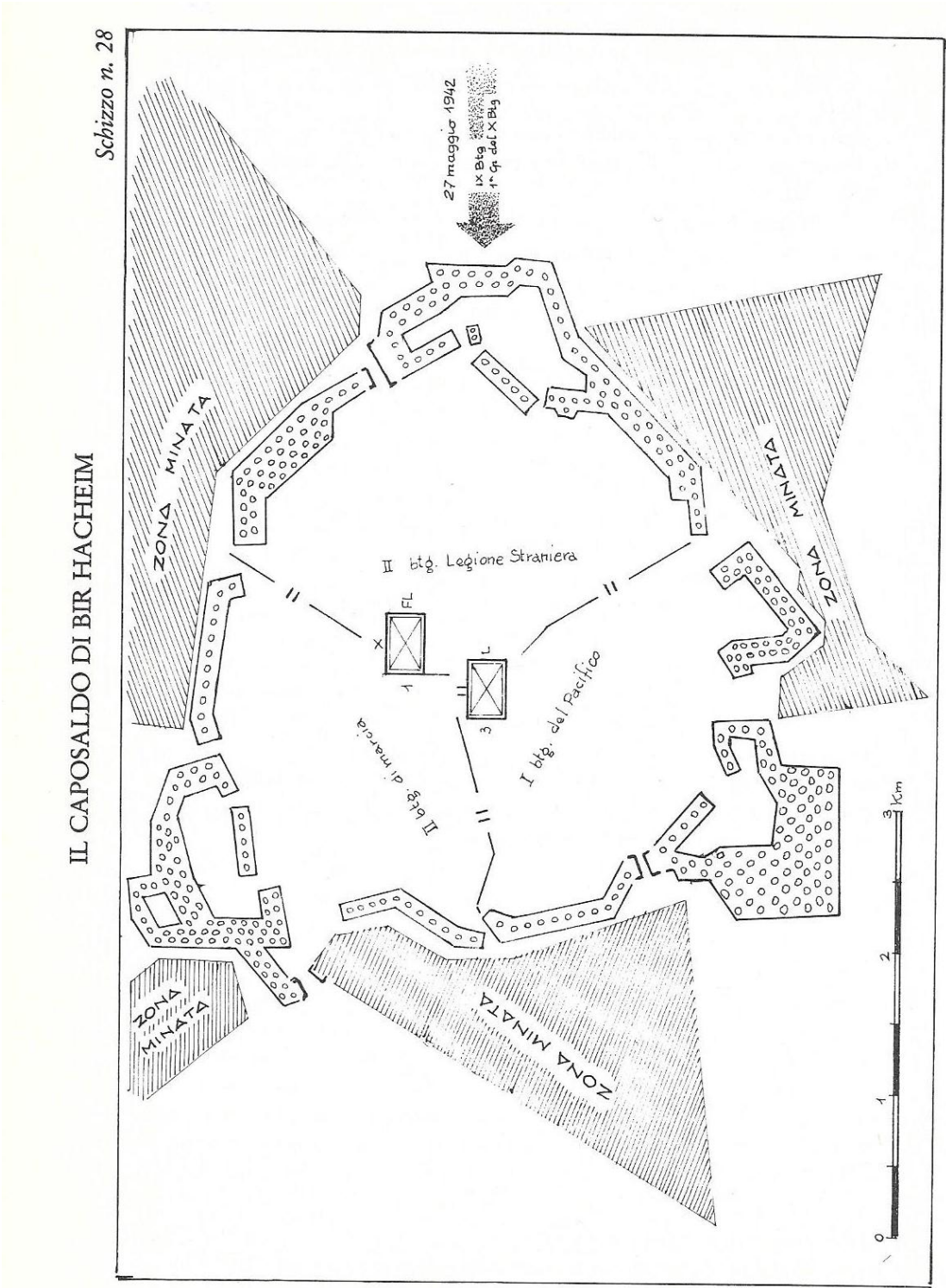
The difficult waiting for the second echelon and the Bersaglieri had been fatal. The Commander of the 9th battalion, Leut. Col. Prestisimone, finding himself in situations that are difficult to control, he had resolved to leave on the route 29° with the direction of the area C, without waiting for anyone <sup>(46)</sup>. The first problem was not having cleared up before companies continue; the second, the interruption of most radio links. After few kilometers passing at high speed, the tanks of Prestisimone began a determined modification to the West, presumably for a failure of leadership. It should be noted that Prestisimone had lost his only tank battalion equipped with compensated compass. At 08:00 formation found itself in front of the eastern side of the stronghold of Bir Hakeim.

On this corner of the desert its slopes had long been firmly placed to defend the 1<sup>st</sup> *France Libre* Brigade of (Gen. Koenig). Its order of battle included the 1st Demi-Brigade of the Foreign Legion, the 2nd colonial Demi-Brigade, the 1<sup>st</sup> Field artillery regiment and smaller units. A total of 3,800 men, including a detachment and a English nucleus of connection, with 16 75 pieces, 60 anti-tank pieces of various caliber, 30 anti-aircraft pieces from, 40 and 20.6 twin and 2 complexes from 13.2, 40 mortars of 81. The cornerstone was divided into three sectors: Southwest, the I Pacific battalion blocked the road to Segnali Nord and from Balta; to the East, the II Battalion of the French Foreign Legion closed the roadway from Bir el Gobi; to the North, the II Battalion of the Ubangui-Chari blocked the road coming from the Trigh el Abd. In reserve and for patrolling, III Foreign Legion battalion (sketch No. 28).

After three months of hard work, the Brigade was almost completely buried. Accesses within had been reduced to three: one to the Northwest, one in the Southwest and the third to the East. Outside the barbed-wire fences and perimeter minefields (50,000 mines) were planted large areas mined (*marais*), connect to large blockade that Got el-Ualeb descended to Bir Hakeim and then returning to the North-East, describing a giant V.

Apparently, given the very short period of time elapsing between the abandonment of Rugbet el-Atasc and meeting with the French, Prestisimone did not realize that he was Bir Hakeim and, above all,

The cornerstone of Bir Hakeim



of a *different* static structure (remember that required the route leading to the East of Bir Hakeim). Or including but thought having to do with defensive type organization of the Indian 3<sup>rd</sup> Mot. Bd.. Of course, as was then declared to the Gen. Koenig, did not expect absolutely a similar system of minefields, especially in terms of the position. The situation was reported to regimental Command via radio, you ignore what exact words. The answer, given by a junior officer (!), was proceeding. Whereupon the Leut. Col. Prestisimone ordered: «*Head down and ahead!*»<sup>(47)</sup>. Evidently neither the command nor the regiment's battalion commander had thought the existence of an mined obstacle as relevant.

The French had been put on notice by the noise of combat on the Rugbet el-Atasc and the command of the 7th Arm. Div., which had alerted at 07:30 for upcoming radio Italian-German offensive and the preparations of the 4th Arm. Bd. to counter-attack. When the XI battalion appeared, Koenig at first thought it might be British tanks, then after a quarter of an hour, no longer had doubts: «*C'était la division Ariete!*». Prestisimone had four companies online: his three with a inadequate fifty tanks and X battalion's 1<sup>st</sup> company, who had followed by Rugbet el-Atasc with fifteen tanks; but only M 13 by the latter and those of the 2nd company of the IX followed by Commander of tank battalion *in the assault* against the II battalion of the French Foreign Legion, under concentrated fire. The other two companies, remained apart, had to see the disaster. According to a French commentary, men of the first echelon attack «*en enfants perdus!*»<sup>(48)</sup>. With Gen. Koenig, recalling the fight, he wrote:

The enemy columns took a charge and are approaching. Our armor-piercing grenades raise around the tanks ochre dust jets (...). It adjusts the shooting (...). Occasionally a tank is hit and immobilizes, a blaze the wraps. Develop several fires causing a screen of black smoke and dense that disperses southwards. Other tanks emerging from this matte screen and continue to move forward despite the fire, despite the losses. The charge is maintained exactly on its initial direction. We were able to ascertain with binoculars that the Italians (...)»<sup>(49)</sup>.

The first tanks, penetrated in the Legion after 08:30. For over an hour and a half the struggle of M. 13 was dramatic. Prestisimone changed three times, because hit. Finally was pulled badly injured from the last tank at eighty meters from a French battery. Then, finally, he radioed the order repeatedly the

Regimental command to fall back on Rugbet el-Atasc. At 10:15 the remains of the IX Tank Battalion abandoned Bir Hakeim, leaving on the ground 31 tanks, of which 18 damaged by mines, and a semovente. Personal losses amounted to 4 deaths and 87 prisoners, many of them wounded. The French appear to have lamented only a slight bruise.

Impress a few lines of the French Brigade Commander. On Prestisimone's body were found documents and papers:

“My 2nd Office has examined these documents that shape the enemy maneuver (...). We read that in the time of attack in possession of the Italian Colonel., we figure under the heading: “9-9:15Hours, destruction of Gaullist Division by the Ariete Brigade”. How much contempt! But what a mistake!  
(50)

The thing is staggering. First of all it was now known that to Bir Hakeim was the first French brigade and not “*Gaullist Division*”; Secondly there was a *Ariete Brigade*; Thirdly the attack on Bir Hakeim was not planned neither by the command of XX Corps nor from *Ariete* and not even by him who made impulsively. Fourthly, that a ' armored ' Brigade could expect to dispose of in a quarter of an hour a Division organized a defense is simply absurd.

As for the episode-and regardless of the courage shown on the battlefield-you must admit without many circumlocutions that it was not a thoughtful policy. Overall, in two fights of the morning, the tank was 132nd 34 dead, 49 wounded, 102 missing and 45 tanks out of action.

Around midday the situation of the Italian XX Corps was as follows. The *Ariete* had finished the mopping up of prisoners at Rugbet el-Atasc, IX Tank Battalion recovered, regrouped and did supply. Just then the *Trieste* there was news of. At 11.30 on Gen. Hassoun turned up by Baldassare to try to explain what happened: the split Command with the facilities were still about eight miles southwest of Bir Hakeim, while the bulk presumably stood at Bir Belafarit, in front of the big mined belt. Under these circumstances, Baldassare ordered him to join De Stefanis and “*let referee to decide, depending on the situation, if you make only a movement toward the East or recede and pass South of Bir Hakeim, get in line with the Ariete and then support them*”<sup>(51)</sup>. Frankly, like choice left for a major general, whose regiments were lost and still had not got the link surprising. It is very likely also

that Baldassarre, having to leave with the *Ariete* to the area C and unwilling or unable to wait in the *Trieste*, whose recovery would certainly have presented a few hours, to Azzi the solution to move directly to the East, a few kilometers north of Bir Hakeim, to rejoin XX Corps moving northwards. So it would be a while. It is clear the extreme inadequacy of information collected on the British deployment to the South of el-Abd and Trigh excessive undervaluation of minefields.

At 12:00 the *Ariete* began in march, followed at 14:30 by the command of the Corps. It was then that Baldassarre knew from a radio message at 09:00 addressed from *Panzerarmee*, fine developments of attack from German mass.

The broad movement to zone B had taken place on a regular basis. Moved themselves well South of Bir Hakeim, the DAK and the 90th Light stopped and supplied. At 04:30 pointed North-East spreading out and heading-without intention, because ideas about the location of the British reserves were few and confused-the 21st *Panzer* with the 22nd Arm. Bd. at Bir el Harmat, the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* with the 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. between Bir el-Bir-el Harmat and Gobi and the 90th Light with the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. at Retma (sketch No. 29).

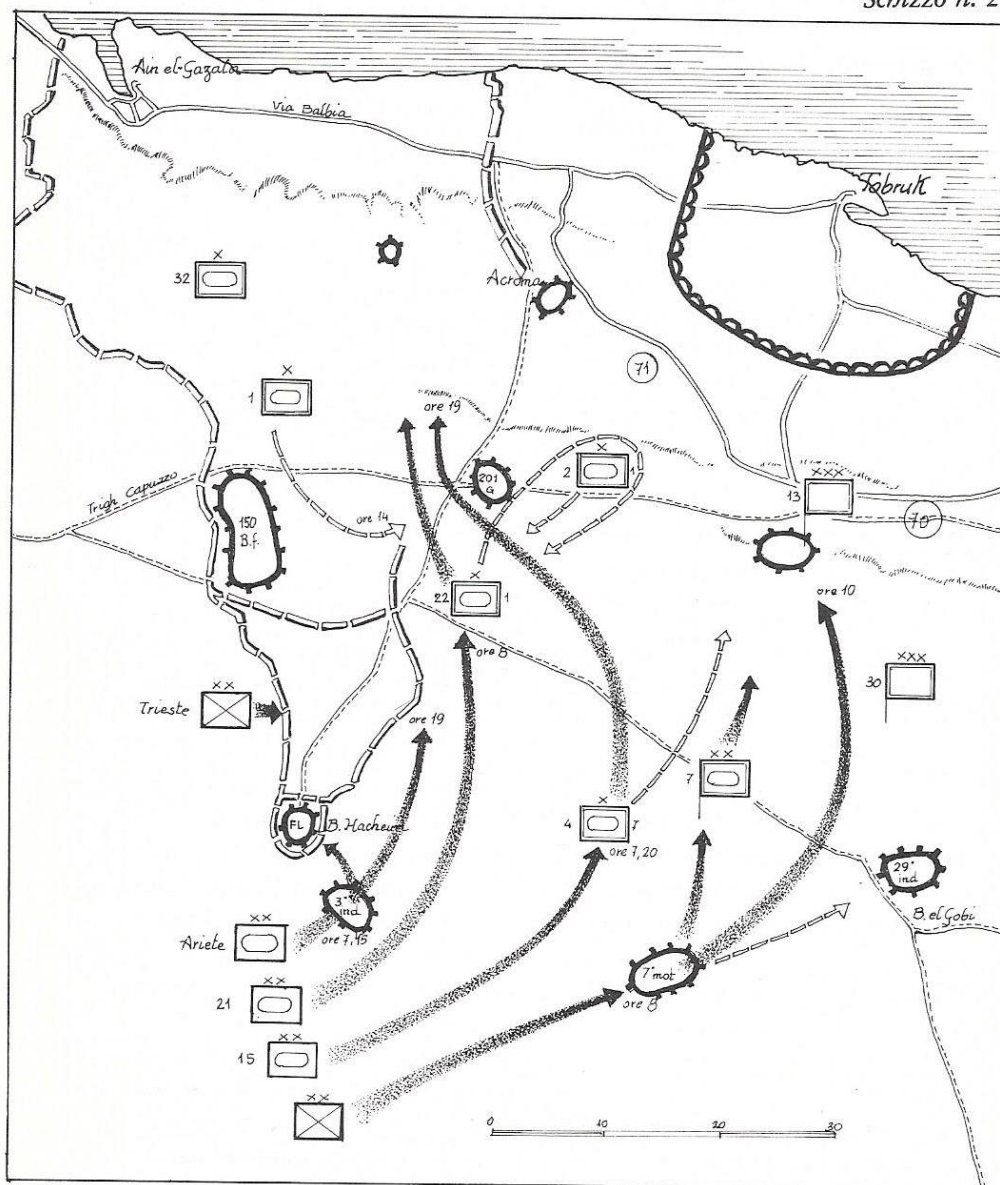
It does not appear that the contact made around 06:30 by XX Corps-according to the historical diary of the latter-with the 21 *Panzer* had to for von Bismarck more meaning of information at a terminating line, because the German Division proceeded quickly until Trigh el Abd, a few kilometers southeast of Bir Harmat, where at 07:45 sighted a large throng of enemy vehicles then parked. Nehring, the current place, ordered a pause so that the 15th *Panzer*, which had detached eastward, of rush, but von Bismarck exploited the blatant preferred surprise and prevent the opponent to the east. However, the sudden clash was acrimonious and lasted almost a few hours. At 10:00 the British Unit - was the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade of Gen. Carr-disorganized diverted Northeast leaving thirty tanks and some artillery pieces on the field.

For its part, the 15th *Panzer* arrived at full speed on the 4th Armored Brigade of Gen. Richards who, by order of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. but without being informed about the seriousness of the situation, we headed Southwest, in support of the Indian 3rd Mot. Bd.. The 8<sup>th</sup> Hussars was virtually destroyed and the 3rd *Royal Tanks* destroyed, but German losses were considerable. Broken contact, Richards stationed himself towards el Adem.

The battle of Gazala (27 May)

LA BATTAGLIA DI AIN EL-GAZALA  
(27 maggio)

Schizzo n. 29



Around 08:00 the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd., at Retma, was still having breakfast, after the long night retreat. According to a witness

“Suddenly some Gunners began firing like crazy. I thought that you wanted to have fun and I was going to make them stop, when we saw something moving in the desert, to the South, approximately six kilometers. Was the whole army of Rommel that was smack upon us <sup>(52)</sup>.

It was, instead, simply the 90th Light, a unit with an exceptional momentum. It fell on the British Brigade, before it could recover from the surprise and the dispersed. The remains went to Bir el Gobi.

But the morning was just halfway. The 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn., continuing the momentum, arrived at Bir Bueid, i.e. on the command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., taking prisoners even Messervy and his Chief of staff (who however managed to escape shortly afterwards). Resuming the race, the 90th Light reached the crossroads of el-Adem at 10:00, having missed another prey: the command of the British 30<sup>th</sup> Corps.

Norrie now had lost control of the situation South of the Trigh el Abd. The caution with which he received overnight information-caution also shared by Messervy-had prevented move immediately the 4th Arm. Bd. Southeast of Bir Hakeim. But the report of a reconnaissance plane sent at dawn dispel uncertainties: this was not a feint conducted by Italian forces, but a real attempt at winding operated by Rommel with all armored and motorized troops. Norrie then (01 :30) that the 4th Arm. Bd.. He went immediately to strengthen the southern flank and the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm Div. started the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd in support of the 4th. However, with Gen. Lumsden hastened to declare that 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. He wasn't able to move before an hour and a half at least, given the lack of critical notice so, in short time, the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. was brought to its knees and 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. He had to bear the German attack without even moving.

The capture of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm Div. command. It was a serious blow because Norrie remained unaware of what was happening <sup>(53)</sup>. He thought of going with caution, to the stronghold of el-Adem, where Gott already was with 13<sup>th</sup> Corp control, and it was good fortune for him unless he was captured by the column of Gen. Kleemann.

At noon, the 21st *Panzer* was north of Bir-el Harmat, 15th *Panzer* to its right, but further back, and the 90th Light at the crossroads of el Adem. The results achieved in a few hours were really sparkling:



put on the run the commander of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp, captured that of the 7th Arm. Div., dispersed two Brigades, put out of combat a motorized brigade and partially destroyed another, captured many materials of various kinds and even found the English. Rommel believed to have undone the armored forces of Ritchie.

He was wrong again and right at noon, when he was congratulating himself and with the commanders of Army Corps, was cruelly disappointed. Lumsden did withdraw the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. with the intention of returning into the fray along with 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd.. At 14:00, while the DAK was about to resume their march towards the North by 21st *Panzer* and while 15th *Panzer* completed its reorganizing, the two British armored brigades broke on the right side and 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Bd. (with 44<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*) the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* attacked on the left flank, completely unexpected by the Germans. “*The entire DAK-reports the drive is Kriegstagebuch assaulted by enemy forces from the East, North and Northeast*”. It is not easy to describe the battle that plagued the section for all afternoon, crushed in a thousand episodes, in the desert including the triangle el Adem-Bir-el Harmat Eluet el Tamar. Suffice it to say that the 21 *Panzer* managed to arrive at the Rigel Maabus after rejected the impact of the *Matildas* of the 44<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, but virtually lost the II/104<sup>th</sup> riflemen and, unfortunately, after having been separated from the right echelon services with accompanying supplies. The 15th *Panzer* having to give up the attempt to continue towards Acroma, was limited to 21<sup>st</sup> approaching, then work countering with another exertion of attack of the British 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. at 19:00, is arrested also at Maabus Rigel, in the West of the roadway to Acroma.

At nightfall the situation of the army could not be very bright. On the front of Gazala the XXI Corps was formed on the position of resistance of the 1st South African Division, while the X Corps was slipped into the large covered held by British 50th Division until Mteifel el-Chebir, dilating dramatically the investment front.

Halfway between el-Chebir Mteifel and Bir Hakeim, namely at Bir Belafarit, stood alone, the *Trieste* <sup>(54)</sup>, whose Commander had decided to fight their way through the minefields in a straight line and join the bulk of the XX Corps northeast of Bir Hakeim. In the morning the 65<sup>th</sup> infantry and the XI Tank battalion had advocated a fight with enemy recon elements losing 12 tanks.

*Ariete*, now at about 17 km south of Bir-el Harmat, had stopped. De Stefanis renounced continue now: overnight were opened the gates and the Division would be able to continue

West of minefield along the Trigh Hakeim. Meanwhile, he proceeded to supplies. That decision, shared by Baldassarre, not changed upon the arrival of an officer of DAK, who represented the opportunity for immediate intervention in favor of the *Afrikakorps*, seriously engaged. It is very clear the position of the *Ariete* <sup>(55)</sup>, but certainly had a significant weight loss account: 30 tanks destroyed and 40 inefficient. However, at 20:00 came an order of the Corps command: the next day, at dawn, XX Corps was to move into its area (B) and connect with the DAK.

The *Afrikakorps*, as mentioned above, had touched the Maabus er-Rigel leaving on the right the cornerstone of *Knightsbridge*. The divisions were arranged in a “hedgehog”, but the 21st Panzer had remained with 80 efficient tanks and petrol for a few hours of combat, while 15th *Panzer* had only 29 tanks intact and dry fuel and ammunition. The 90th Light, then, appeared totally isolated. Went for nothing his attempt on el-Adem, had folded the little available also in a hedgehog, engulfed by units of the 4th aArmored Brigade.

In the early afternoon Rommel had sought to go personally to the 90th Light. He managed to avoid being captured by a British armored formation (probably from the 4th Arm.Bd.), but had to give up to join with Gen. Kleemann. At dusk he stopped with the Army Command about three kilometers north-east of Bir-el Harmat. The Leut. Col. Westphal, however, had made his way up to Nehring with several radio stations. Rommel acknowledged the failure of the attempt of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp caging and admitted his deep concern sort of for the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, losses in tanks (more than a third of the *Panzers* were out of action) and the interruption of supplies, an essential element for the maneuver. On the other hand was convinced he had inflicted heavy damage to the 1st and 7th Armored Division, despite the fearsome Grant. So despite “*this situation, that on the evening of May 27 there was before serious problems, I looked to the further development of the battle with great confidence*” <sup>(56)</sup>.

His 28<sup>th</sup> operating design was consistent with such a way of seeing: bring the 90th Light West of el-Adem and meet with the DAK, then joined forces, to resume action to towards Acroma. Probably would have done better to settle out, retrieve the columns of services and sweep the British tanks still circulating and which you could fear a renewed counterattack for the Morrow.

In the enemy camp “*the day ended with the British high command more satisfied of the fighting of the day than it was Rommel*” <sup>(57)</sup>

In fact, all believed that the bulk of the 90th Light and 100 *Panzer*s were left in front of Gazala. Only on the evening of May 28, when he surrendered to Rommel, was operation including the scope of maneuver. However the feeling of interspersing Axis divisions was quite clear. The 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. and 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Bd. were fully effective, while having suffered some damage in the fighting with the *Panzer*; the 7th Arm. Div. had recovered a good part of the 4th Arm. Bd. and 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. In the middle of the battlefield was the 201<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade, Southwest the 1<sup>st</sup> French Brigade and the Southeast 29th Indian, all intact. 13<sup>th</sup> Corp had fronted the Crüwell offensive without many difficulties. Therefore it was possible a coordinated intervention to crush Rommel.

## MAY 28

Arriving at the command of DAK, Leut. Col. Westphal is the extreme seriousness could see the conditions under which poured the *Panzerdivisionen*. Had absolute need-food, water, oxygen, fuel and ammunition-and he saw a clear way out. Discarded a retreat intended to open up the path of the supply columns because he risked permanently compromising the fortunes of the maneuver (but mostly because contrary to Rommel's way of thinking), was attacked by *Ariete* northwards, already ordered the command of XX Corps the same evening of the 27<sup>th</sup>. This could provide the double result to collect most of the armored forces and opening the way for supplies. But there was also another possibility, of course in conjunction and not as an alternative to the first: the breakthrough of the English 13<sup>th</sup> Corp by the Crüwell group.

So Westphal «ordered» Crüwell to attack push straight ahead. He certainly good, but obviously underestimated the strength of Gazala. Crüwell immediately sent the notice: violent effort should be exerted to obtain “*a rapid success of strategic order*”, therefore the XXI Corps was to locate the break in the South of Gazala to open the via Balbia and X Corps to break the resistance of the British 50th Inf. Div. moved position from Mteifel el-Chebiri in direction of Eluet et-Tamar, where was the 21st *Panzer*. “*Report when is completed the preparation for the ultimate attack. Do so soon!*” urged Crüwell and at 10:45<sup>(58)</sup> he imparted the executive provisions

preliminary aviation intervention, artillery preparation of a quarter of an hour, the beginning of the attack on 13:00. However an hour later there was an afterthought. The XXI Corps would be limited to an adjustment of the front, occupying 14:00 a crucial location for the breakthrough in the coastal sector. This assignment was entrusted to the 15th Schützen Brigade, passing directly employed by Crüwell.

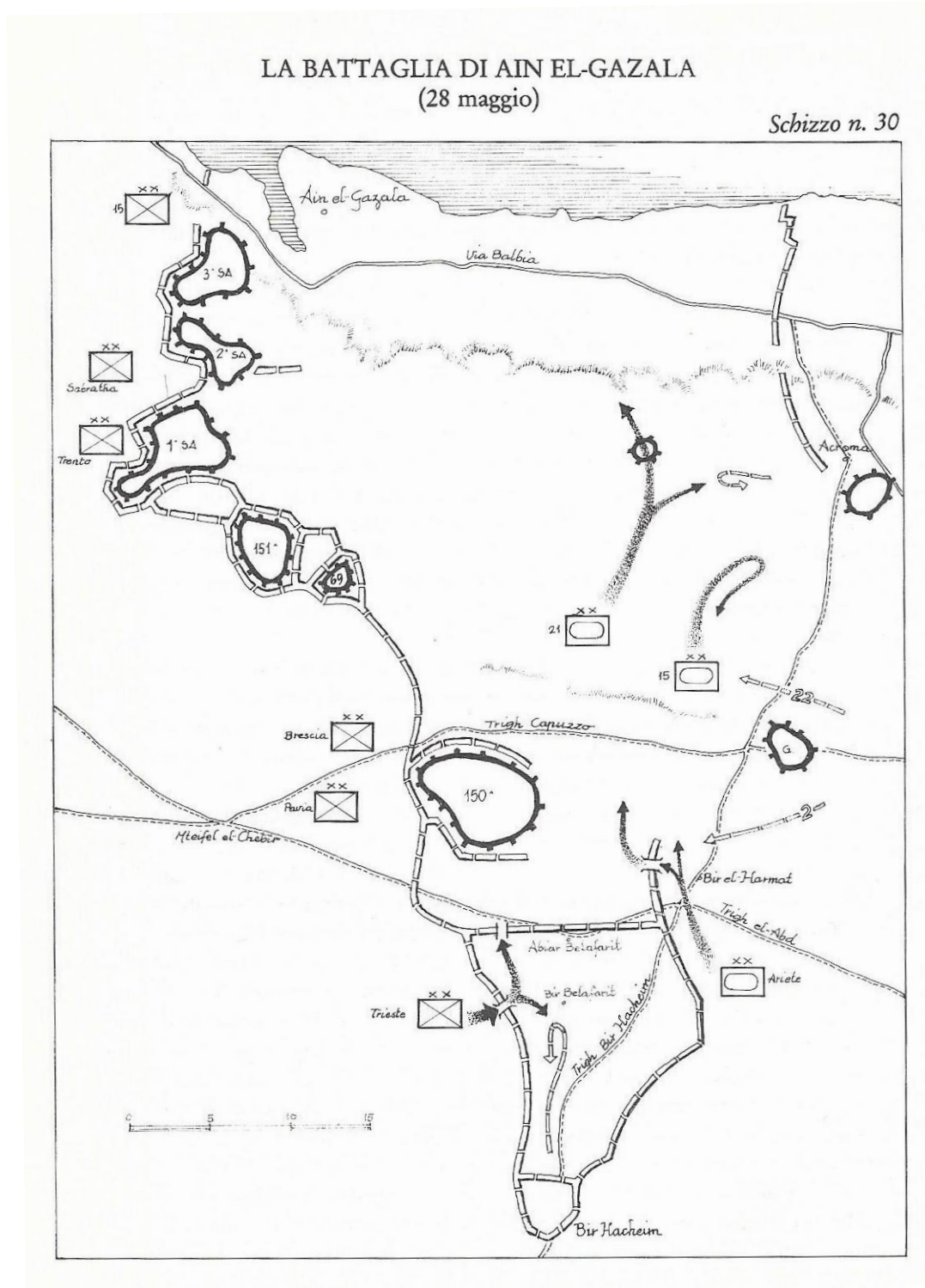
On the back of the line of Gazala the XX Corps was involved in two independent actions (sketch No. 30). To the *Ariete* was given the task of overcoming the area of Bir-el Harmat pointing towards Northwest. Taking into account the difficulty of passage through the minefields, could not attack before 11:00. As regards *Trieste*, Hassoun's intention was to reach directly the area C, on a single divisional column walk, preceded by an armored battalion. Opened easily the road in the mined divider that Got el-Ualeb down to Bir Hakeim, the Division came in the big V. To navigate in the floundering maze, he knew to the South, lying immediately in contact with a formation of the III Foreign Legion battalion, come to face that opponent who at Bir Hakeim he did not understand from where he came.

Clarifying the situation, Azzi made a breach in the mined belt between the legs of V and moved north to join with the *Ariete*. Moreover, the unexpected resistance encountered by a battalion of the 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade, so that, after a new attempt took place at 18:30, declined to pass for the moment Trigh el Abd.

The DAK remained essentially stationary, but tried to send items to the North and Northwest. The 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* went on Eluet et-Tamar, dispersing the Stopcol Group (which had nine Valentine of the 8<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* out of combat) then saw the ridge overlooking the via Balbia at hand, continued the action and occupied the *Commonwealth Keep*, held by a small tactical group of South Africans. In addition from here he opened fire on the rear of the 1<sup>st</sup> South Division. The 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* rather soon had to abandon the attempt on Acroma.

Contrary to what one might assume, Gen. Lumsden had decided to hold all day a defensive attitude, expecting a massive effort of DAK against el-Adem; Rommel, who believed he had shown as a meeting point between DAK and 90<sup>th</sup> Light. In this mental orientation, had established that the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. to close the space between *Knightsbridge* and Maabus er-Rigel, that the 201<sup>st</sup> Guards Bd. all-out defend its position and that 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. Act on the right side of an attack by *Ariete* against

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the Guards. Since the 15th *Panzer* set underway the attempt on Acroma at 16:00 and the *Ariete* didn't budge until about 11:00, the English 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. remained idle for the entire morning.

The 90th Light was definitely the most exposed units. Headed towards Bir el Harmat, but incursions of the *Western Desert Air Force* and the oozing of small raids carried out by the 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd, which also proceeded westward to rejoin the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., put in tremendous difficulties.

At noon he intervened with a precise aim Norrie: encircle Rommel in the area of Bir el Harmat. Lumsden decided to throw in the 2nd Arm. Bd. and the 1st Tank Bd on the *Ariete*. This exit by passages, had begun the advance at 11:15. Acted in the first echelon V/8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and X/132<sup>nd</sup> Tank with V Semovente Group and a group of 75/27 of the 132<sup>nd</sup> artillery; in the second echelon, the XII/8<sup>o</sup> Bersaglieri strengthened. Soon came upon the *Matilda* from the West and the *Crusader* from the East. “*A fight*-has been stylized - *which ended slightly in favor of the British*”<sup>(59)</sup>. But you could argue the opposite. The first clash ended with the retreat of the 44<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* and the second with that of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., which left in place some working 25 pounder guns.

Late in the afternoon began to emerge the encirclement of the British 150<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd: Northeast, beyond Sidi Muftah, was established 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri reinforced; to the East, in the area of Bir-el Harmat was command of the *Ariete* with two tank battalions and groups of 88 and 90; to the Southeast it was facing the *Trieste*; to the West the Hecker Group had been inserted between the Trigh establishing an albeit fleeting tactical connection between the *Pavia* and *Trieste*.

At 18:30 a sudden strike launched by the 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars (2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd.) swept the tactical Command of Rommel spreading disorder in the DAK supply columns, which flow again through the *Ariete*, but the intervention of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank and the Kiehl tactical group restored calm. Almost simultaneously concluded the fighting on fronts of the 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa Inf. Div. and of the British 50<sup>th</sup> to Inf. Div: the only result achieved by the Crüwell Group was contact made anywhere near the perimeter minefields.

Rommel had good reason to be concerned. The DAK remained separate from the XX Corps and the supplies, 90th Light had not yet managed to get to Bir el Harmat, the Crüwell group did not have the force of penetration to open a breach in the static defenses of Gott's 13<sup>th</sup> Corp and, as regards the supply channels, the two were still banned by the Trigh minefields and to go

around Bir Hakeim was too long and too exposed. The need to gather became more and more urgent.

That evening, in Cairo, Auchinleck examined carefully the reports received from the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the intelligence service. At the end he prepared a letter to Ritchie, in which he summarized the conclusions which he had reached. First made the calculation of availability. The Axis was left with about 250 tanks against 375 of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army: 150 of the 1st Arm Bd., 100 of the remnants of the 1st and 7th Arm. Div., 75 of the 32nd Tank Bd and 50 of the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Bd..The Infantry forces amounted: to the Axis four Italian divisions and a part of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light for a total of 20,000 men, a hundred small field gun and about 60 anti-tank guns; for the 8th Army in three divisions (including the 2nd South African Inf. Div. in Tobruk) totaling 52,000 men and 216 field pieces. They were also used for a counter-offensive maneuvered the 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, much of the Indian 3<sup>rd</sup> Mot. Bd. and two motorized brigades of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. Finally, in case of need they could have recourse to two brigades of the 4th Indian Division, although limited to static duties.

With a similar supremacy, the purpose could not be that of "*destroy the opposing army as soon as possible and prevent it from escaping to the West.*" Auchinleck continued:

“The southern flank of the enemy is, as always in this theater, its critical point. Then, by calculating can count now on adequate superiority in tanks and a large superiority in infantry, we could focus on this.

Our immediate goal will be Segnali [North]. To immobilize the enemy located more to the North, we could launch a secondary attack, preferably with 50<sup>th</sup> Div. and heavy tanks, against Temrad, while the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Div. lead demonstrative actions against the enemy but without left wing push, because we want the enemy remains in place.

In addition, to encircle the opponent, all light mobile forces will no doubt onto Mechili and Benghazi, while the L.R.D.G. Commandos and disturb the enemy lines of communication wherever possible (...)" <sup>(60)</sup>.

The letter does not come under the command of the 8th Army that on the Morrow, but Ritchie was always satisfied. Also according to his calculations, Rommel could not more than 250 efficient tanks, while he had 240 medium tanks and 90 infantry tanks, and another 40 medium and 30 infantry awaited us the next day. Though the judgment given by a protagonist was decidedly negative:

“The operations of the 28<sup>th</sup> provide a glaring example of lack of action by the British command. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade spent all day “*observing*” the 15th *Panzer* on the Rigel Ridge, while the 4th Armored Brigade was to harass the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, which was well equipped with anti-tank and pieces could remain isolated. The 1st tank Brigade and the 2nd Armored Brigade operated South of *Knightsbridge* and inflicted some loss to *Ariete*, the 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Brigade did absolutely nothing and remained behind the front lines of the 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa Division”<sup>(61)</sup>.

## MAY 29

“On the morning of 29-had to write von Mellenthin-the position of the Afrikakorps was becoming desperate, but the situation was saved by the personal intervention of Rommel”<sup>(62)</sup>. The arrival of desired supplies, after a long and perilous voyage around Bir Hakeim and through the pitfalls of English recon elements, occurred in the late evening of the 28<sup>th</sup>, had caught the attention of Rommel, who was promptly given to organize a column to bring to the DAK. Taking advantage of the arrival of the 90th Light at Bir el Harmat-during the night, he moved the *Ariete* just west of *Knightsbridge*, to form a barrier against offenses from the East and, sheltered by this barrier, guide the supplies all the way to the 15th *Panzer*.

At dawn the enemy began to work. Norrie had decided to concentrate his *tanks* in the area of *Knightsbridge* to charge and crush Rommel against the British 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade. But the action picked up momentum very slowly and dissolved in partial conflict and not conclusive (sketch No. 31). The 2nd Arm. Bd. of Briggs broke onto the scene of what will be one of the toughest tanks battles and alternate performance at about 11:00, going to run into the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*. The first impact of the *Grants* of the 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars forced the Germans to retreat, to recover immediately behind a screen of anti-tank and also thanks to the arrival of the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, which retreated for Eluet et-Tamar. Further South, the *Ariete* was battling with 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers. In such circumstances it cannot be a surprise that Briggs was found soon in a dreadful position. The 10<sup>th</sup> Hussar-which the day before had lost almost all its *Grants*-remained with just three tanks, the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers saw most of the *Crusader*, put out of combat but the *Grant* still squadron in good working order.

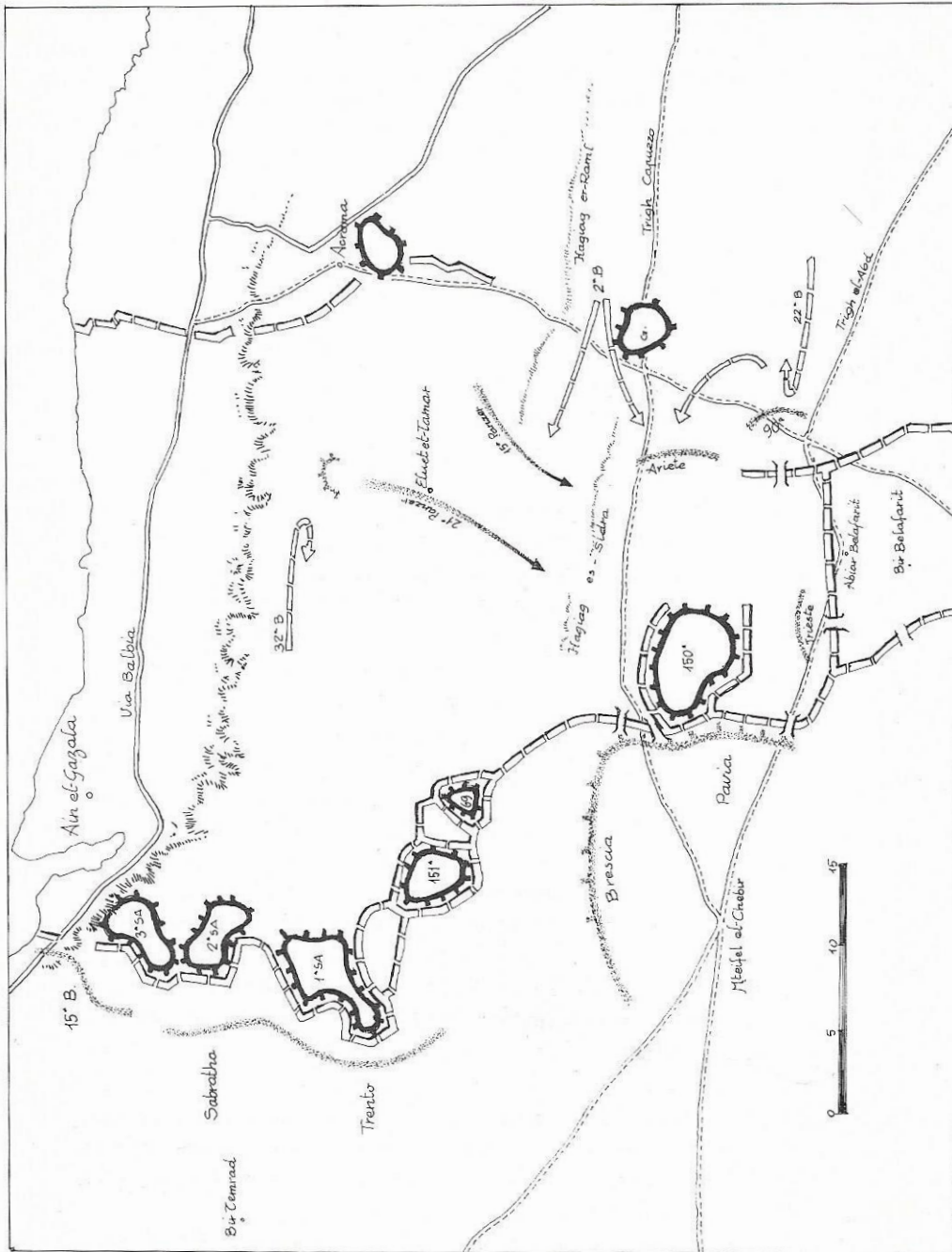
At noon came the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm Bd., returning from an meaningless attempt to go against the 90<sup>th</sup> Light. His fight with the *Ariete* will



The battle of Gazala (29 May)

LA BATTAGLIA DI AIN EL-GAZALA  
(29 maggio)

Schizzo n. 31



drag unconstructed on for several hours in the middle of a sandstorm. At the same time the 7<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* the 32nd Tank Bd. sought to regain *Commonwealth Keep* firmly in the hands of the 39<sup>th</sup> *Panzerjaeger* group of 21st Panzer, but managed only to lose seven *Matilda*. The 4th Arm. Bd. shone by his absence, however location employed by Lumsden. Moved back the first evening until South of el-Adem (which had allowed Kleemann to finally bring the 90<sup>th</sup> Light to Bir el- Harmat) was early in the afternoon that he received orders to give support to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. It had the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* therefore could be decisive. Unfortunately the *ghibli* that blew over the desert kept her from entering into action. When it was around 18:00, it was too late: it was not difficult to hold up the 90th Light until fall of night, putting out of action of five *Grant* and three *Stuart*.

While the *Ariete* punched between Bir el-Hagiag es and Harmat-Sidra, the *Trieste* was opening the road northwards. Shortly after dawn had moved in two columns: the left 65<sup>th</sup> infantry reinforced with the XI Tank battalion with the objective of Got el-Aslagh, to the right the 66<sup>th</sup> infantry with objective a position four kilometers south-east of the former. At 09:30 the Trigh el Abd was passed, encountering sporadic and weak resistance at about 10:30 the objectives were achieved. Having regard to the trend of things at noon Baldassarre arranged the tried Division to move as soon as possible in the area of Sidi Muftah to pick up right tactical link with *Ariete*, placed at Hagiag es-Sidra, and left with the X Corps, which it was hoped would break the Trigh Capuzzo. The movement of *Trieste*, at first quickly, became increasingly cautious. Given the opponent, that attitude with armored units pushed westward, initial orders were modified and at 20:00 the Division arrested on the Trigh Capuzzo with the VII armored cars battalion, but with the bulk South of Bir et-Tamar, i.e. South of the *Ariete*, facing East.

During the night of the 29<sup>th</sup>, Crüwell -by order of Rommel-had placed the resumption of pressure against the 1st South African Division, this time with the main effort with the *Trento* at the Alam Hamza salient. Between dawn and 07:30 the 62nd infantry (extreme right) managed to establish itself on some advanced position, but the *Sabratha* stumbled upon a tremendous fire and was forced to fall back, losing 400 men and many accompanying tanks.

Further south the X Corps made the laborious business of passages through the minefields, despite fierce disturbance activities placement taking place from the 69th and 150th Brigade. “*The entire night spent*

*in steps to implementation gaps. Deep minefields extensions make it difficult to pass. I'm looking for any solution for open road and continue on targets. Opposing very intense reaction causes sensitive losses (...)*" Gioda told Comando Superiore on events of the day. Finally the *Brescia* finished opening a passage North of Trigh Capuzzo while simultaneously the *Pavia* made a second near the Trigh el Abd. The exploitation of the passages was tried immediately, but the intervention of a formation of *Valentines* of 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Bd. forced a temporary halt, while conversely a strong barrage stopped the British counterattack.

In the late morning was an unpredictable accident. Crüwell, departed his Command around 08:00 to travel to Gioda, due to a pilot error was found in the space of 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Despondent, he was taken prisoner. At the command of the Group had remained only Leut. Col. von Mellenthin, Mar. Kesselring who arrived by chance, who asked about the progress of the battle, asked him to take the reins of the group until Rommel had not provided otherwise. Kesselring was "*amused*" by the request and mentioned to the right degree, very compatible with a subordinate position compared to Colonel-General, "*but I-wrote von Mellenthin-put in evidence that would satisfy us not have an Italian General in command of the Crüwell Group in Yes critical circumstances*"<sup>(63)</sup>. Then Kesselring, evidently impressed by the wisdom of that observation, remained. It must be said about Kesselring that regard, used a circumlocution, you don't know whether diplomatic or more even more dismissive: "*I expressed my willing (...) because (...) it would not have been possible to find otherwise, an army officer for this task*"<sup>(64)</sup>. In any case, assumed command of the front and including the problems of the XXI Corps, decided to temporarily suspend the attack. The *Sabratha* stiffened positions behind; the *Trento*, although being a bit biased forward, remained where it was for the purposes of the continuation of the effort; the *Brescia* entrusted to II/19<sup>th</sup> infantry reinforced the bridgehead created to protect the passage North of the Trigh Capuzzo and dispose the 20<sup>th</sup> infantry front North; the *Pavia* sided face Southeast and guarding the gate opened on the Trigh el Abd pose a tactical group of the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri.

Little enough Kesselring was just to realize the merits of certain criticisms from many Italians General to Rommel:

“I met so the fix of a commander must follow the instructions of a superior command, which actually gives orders, and indeed makes even unobtainable. Although the presence of Rommel among the troops that made up the wing tasked with decisive movements had certainly revive the fighting effect, he too remained subject to the courses and alternatives in the fight. The eyewitnesses reported what was the confusion in Rommel's staff during the first day of clashes between armored forces (...)”<sup>(65)</sup>.

And you can add that even von Waldau, the *Fliegerfuhrer*, was far from satisfied with the aerial combats that were held:

“Due to the complete lack of information on the situation on the ground of our troops and an action plan defined, we were forced to work by intuition, based on the results of aerial reconnaissance and enemy air forces. Sometimes we were forced to make decisions without having the foggiest idea whether they were adhering to the general situation”<sup>(66)</sup>.

Rommel had not suffered the fate of a Crüwell. Always looking for a way out, ordered a new great effort for the next day. The DAK was to attack on the rear of the 1<sup>st</sup> South African positions in the area of Gazala with the aid from the West, the Crüwell group. In relation to such understanding, the X Corps, with Hecker Group received<sup>(67)</sup> task to break through the front of the 50th British Division and then turn the 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa aiming at Gazala and connecting with the DAK. the XXI Corps and the 15th *Schützen* Brigade should instead push forward strong combat patrols, ready to take advantage of a progression. The beginning of the operation at 04:30.

But Rommel had hesitations and doubts. Consulted with Nehring, Gause and Westphal and the overall picture appeared critical. It is true that now the meeting of all motorized and armored divisions had taken place, though the losses were sensitive (even the Gen. von Vaerst, Commander of the 15th *Panzer*, was wounded) and he couldn't hope to receive more supplies for the route South of Bir Hakeim. In those circumstances, if an attempt to cause the collapse of the defense of Gazala with a double attack, while keeping at bay the British brigades, had failed, the mass of Italian-German operation would remain exposed to total defeat. Ritchie had the 2nd, 4th and 22nd Arm. Bd. and the Guards for a counterattack: more than enough forces to determine the failure of DAK and XX Corp poorly equipped with fuel and ammunition.

The alternative was to suspend the implementation of the original plan,

assuming a temporary defensive positions reached and opening a safe channel of supply through the minefields. Discarded the danger of an attack of the British 13<sup>th</sup> Corps against the Italian XXI and X Corps for lack of superiority, it was likely that Ritchie's efforts would be directed against Nehring and Baldassarre. Rommel's opinion, it was possible to hold off the opponent with an elastic defense and at the same time meet X Corps with units of the 90th light and DAK to gain control and full availability of access points. However, if the pressure of the armored opponents had made untenable, the mass of maneuver would have a way to disengage moving to the West of the minefields.

On this alternative was the choice and at 21:24 were issued orders for 30 May. South African comment seems well placed: “*it was the only thing to do, but was also an admission of defeat*”<sup>(68)</sup>. But Rommel had an agile mind and a operating instinct that no British commander possessed. And then the abandonment of the match was the last idea that might come to mind.

Rommel's decision to try and open a safe supply route and eventual retreat through the minefields was understood by Ritchie, thanks to reports of aerial and ground reconnaissance. Furthermore, the information service had discovered that the 15th *Panzer* was starting with just four days of water and lacked ammunition and all armored units had fuel shortage. Then the meeting and mass concentration of Italian-German maneuver was performed according as a blatant sign of weakness. Other twenty-four hours of strong commitment would have led to the complete exhaustion of resources. As a result, it became permissible to think of a counteroffensive: 13<sup>th</sup> Corp (obviously with new troops from Tobruk and from Gambut) would have pinned Rommel to the East of minefields and the 30<sup>th</sup>, with all mobile units, would be shot to the South of Bir Hakeim, swooping behind the Italian X Corps and thus creating the conditions for a subsequent rapid advance on el-Benghazi and Mechili.

## MAY 30

“*Ritchie-according to Messervy, who had again reached the 8th Army-was rather foolishly optimistic in comments and in all his behavior, but under this varnish was uncertain. Said*

*continuously: "Ah, we punch now!"*, *When it was clear that was not true nothing* “<sup>(69)</sup>. The morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> Lumsden tried repeatedly to break with the 2nd and 22nd Arm. Bd. on the positions of Bir el-Aslagh (southwest of the intersection of Trigh Capuzzo and Hakeim), where he was the rearguard of the *Afrikakorps*. In the village had instead brought the *Ariete*, which all day faced English armored effort supported by strong artillery. The trump card of *Ariete* was probably formed from a respectable anti-tank troops, centred on the V/1<sup>st</sup> rapid artillery with German 88 and a group of 90/53. At 16:00, after a last attempt conducted with fresh forces, the striker had to desist (also saw a couple of *Stuka*) and abandon the battlefield with losses so sensitive that on the Morrow the two brigades were forced to give birth each to a Regimental formation <sup>(70)</sup>. The 4th Armored Brigade did not have much to do. A part of it was sent to the vain search for 25 *Panzers* which, according to information, had to be towed to the route South of Bir Hakeim. The 201<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade, finally, in the context with a column along the Trigh Capuzzo, lost 157 men, seven 6 pdr guns and five 25 pdr Gung. And this was all over by the British.

On the front of Gazala, at 2 a.m. Kesselring had canceled the formerly organized operation. Navarini, who had recovered the 15th *Schützen* Brigade, limited himself to pull slightly the 62<sup>nd</sup> *Trento* infantry South of Alam Hamza, a prolongation of the right wing Corps. Gioda, on the other hand, encountered some problems. At 10:15 the X Corps had finally secured the connection with DAK, but between it and the XXI Corps had created a dangerous vacuum of about 10 km, of which South African mechanized elements were taking advantage for a systematic disruptive action against the rear of the *Brescia* and *Pavia*. The Corps was now entering into the position largely covered by enemy resistance North of the Trigh Capuzzo with an egg-shaped device, which on three-quarters of the perimeter was subject to British fire. The problem was tactical and logistical collection. Failure to achieve the objectives had made it impossible to open a new and shorter communications line via Balbia and imposed, instead, to ensure the flow of supplies and evacuate through el-Cherima. However this line ran parallel to the range that occurred between the XXI Corps and the *Brescia* and then was exposed to fire and enemy incursions.

Now the infantry divisions needed many materials to strengthen the bases as well as the kitchen and barrels for

water. This put in an embarrassing situation: on the one hand, the logistics needs require the use of unit's vehicles; on the other hand, the possibility of a sudden resumption of the advance required to keep cargo and vehicles at the units.

Meanwhile "*through continuous appeals by radio*" Kesselring obtained from Rommel talks "*in a place of your choice*" <sup>(71)</sup>. The meeting took place at 16:00 at the tactical Command of Gioda. There was also a significant character, Maj. Gens. von Below, Hitler's personal aide. Rommel exhibited their understandings: first beat opposing armored forces, possibly in defensive battle, otherwise attacking himself. Afterwards, on the basis of the results achieved, proceed east to successive swings of annihilating, from time to time remaining enemy forces overtaken. As the 8<sup>th</sup> Army losses were valued at 345 tanks, 21 armored cars, 53 cannons and 200 vehicles captured or destroyed and 2,000 prisoners, the situation of handling mass remained dangerously unstable due to the presence of the *box* of the English 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade at Got el- Ualeb, who beat with fire the passed through the minefields. There was a danger that the ammunition shortages prevented to resist successfully concentrated impact of the tanks by Norrie. Then it was necessary to eliminate 150<sup>th</sup> brigade as soon as possible. Rommel would have personally conceived.

Meanwhile he did convey to Comando Superiore, by Col. Mancinelli, his opinion on the operating time:

"(...) The army has inflicted heavy losses on the enemy with his own losses bearable. The enemy has lost so far the 2/5 of their tanks. I predict for the May 31 decisive attack for enemy armored forces from the East and from the North and in the current deployment area. I am convinced of the beneficial result of this defensive battle all the more that the troop has great spirit and its supplies will be completed during the night. I realize that the enemy will tomorrow again lose a large number of tanks and therefore further his weaken forces. I hope I can go back on the offensive in the coming days, after the temporary defensive dictated for supply reasons (...)"

At 21.30 Kesselring was given the arrangements for the next day: the XXI and the X Corps remained on the defensive, with some minor adjustments to improve the deployment.

Finally on day one must say something about the question of the *Criiwell Group*. In the not so distant rear line, the 29<sup>th</sup> Bastico had learned by chance-by a radio message of XXI Corps-the existence of a Crüwell Corps command. Appalled, spoke with the

Leut. Col. Heggenreiner, connecting with the Comando Superiore. These anticipated the news of the capture of Crüwell by the British and explained the reasons that had prompted Rommel to be that temporary command for coordination of X and XXI Corps. He also added that Kesselring had been replaced, finding himself on the spot, so as not to create discontinuity and crisis. Bastico, as is logical, did not like anything Navarini, ordered to assume command of the Group and participated in the decision by Rommel, who asked for an appointment. Since in the meantime Kesselring had informed of his intervention, temporary Bastico formally informed him that he intended Navarini to hold the two Italian Corps. In response, Rommel not only will drop the request for interview by Bastico but on 10 June dissolved the *Crüwell group*, picking up directly the reins of all Corps.

### **3. The battles of the “CAULDRON” and BIR HAKEIM**

The narrow corridor heads made between X Corp and the mass of maneuver, if granted a minimum of breath to Baldassarre and Nehring, it did not solve the logistical problem as a whole. Possession of Bir Hakeim and the total absence of the Axis troops in the South of the parallel of Bir Belafarit allowed full freedom of movement to enemy armour, they could go more or less undisturbed in rear of X and XXI Corps and put in crisis, with their aggressiveness, even supplies of divisions engaged on the front of Gazala. The destruction and even the partial or complete capture of Italian and German truck convoys induced the Comando Superiore, who had responsibility for the feeding of the troops, in two sizes: arrange an escort service and change line of supply and evacuation. This was increased to follow the via Balbia up to Tmimi, then proceed southwards behind the device, to various places for divisional distribution.

As mentioned above, Rommel had resolved to eliminate the bulk of the strongpoint Got el-Ualeb absolute precedence over any other objective. At Got el-Ualeb, the British 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade (Gen. W. Haydon) was very well placed and the events of recent days had led to an improvement of defenses on the front of the throat. In addition, there were the remains of refugees of the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade, left without support. The order of the army came to Baldassarre and Nehring in the early hours



of 31 May. In anticipation of a British attack, the massive bulk of the DAK, the *Ariete* and elements of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light had to stay in a semicircle leaning to Hagiag es-Sidra by crossing to the North and East directions from *Knightsbridge*. A second circle, around Got el-Ualeb, was entrusted to the 15th Panzer, the 90th Light and the *Trieste* (sketch # 32).

At dawn Gen. Haydon is seen to deliver, with its great wonder, a formal order for surrender, which of course also formally rejected. A first attempt by the 90<sup>th</sup> Light and *Trieste* went for nothing. A second prolonged attack, launched by the 15th *Panzer* was the conquest of certain advanced positions, but came to a halt in front of the 6-Pounder pieces and some Bofors anti-aircraft. However, the stronghold was surrounded and had shown its weaknesses. When the evening shadows fell, the situation of the 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade was severely compromised. Thirteen tanks remained, twelve pieces of 25 lb. with a hundred grenades in all, six medium-sized pieces with 20 shots each and a small share of the 6 lb cannons. "*If in the early hours of the following day aid were not to arrive, the Brigade would apparently cease to exist as a fighting unit*" <sup>(72)</sup>. Rommel decided to throw them on all available forces, taking advantage of the inertia of the enemy.

It was alleged that on the evening of May 31 was a crucial moment for the mass of maneuver, basing this claim on the comment of a protagonist, then-Col. Bayerlein:

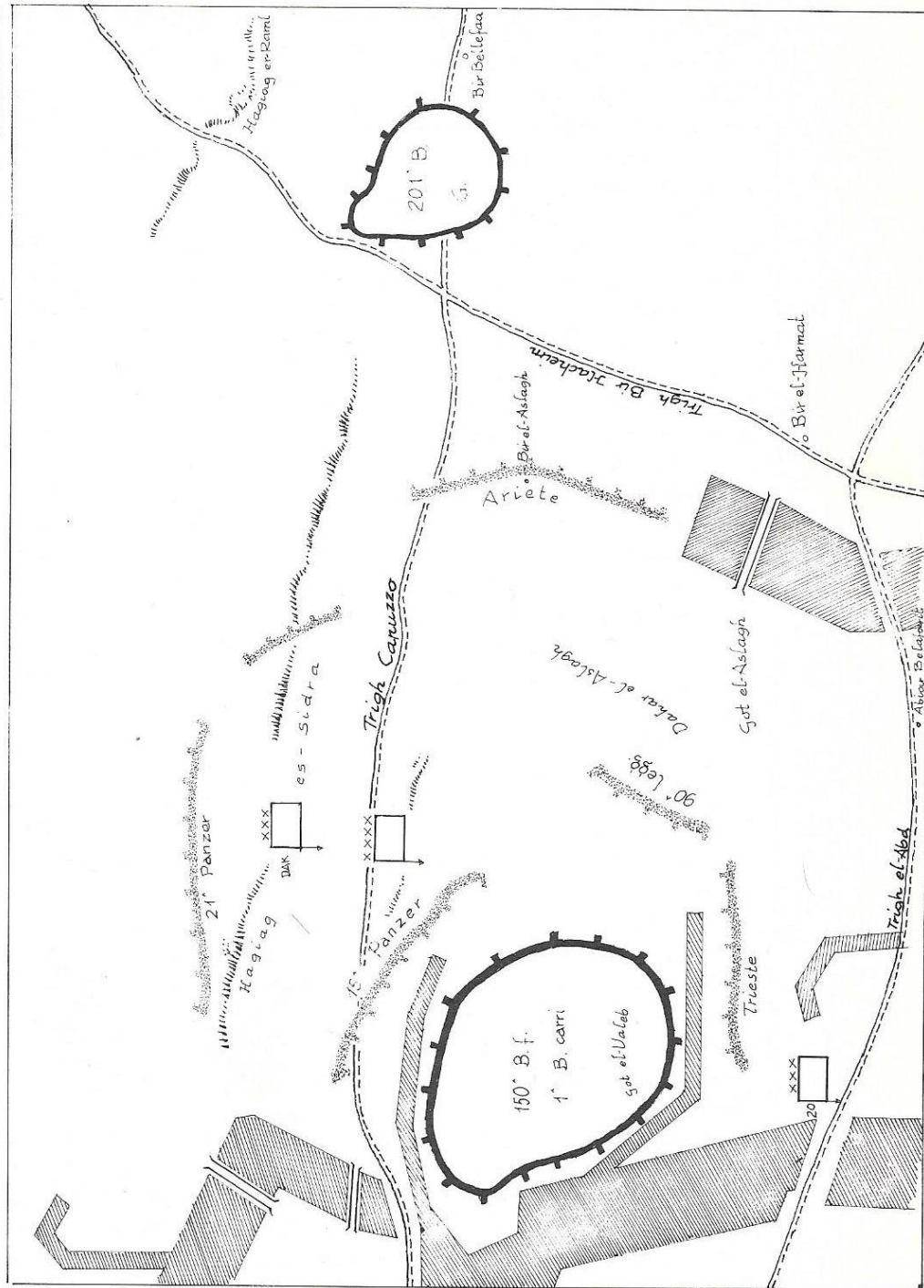
"Gen. Crüwell, Commander of the Afrika Korps had the plane hit and was forced to make a landing in front of the position of 150th Brigade, where he was taken prisoner. General Gaussian [sic], Chief of staff of Rommel, was wounded. General Nehring took the place of Crüwell, while I went to replace Gaikwad. Failed attempting to conquer Bir Hakeim and open a gap in both minefield implored Rommel to suspend the action, but he would not listen. Everything, as I recall, took place on the evening of 31 May. We were in a desperate situation, with their backs against the minefield, without food, without water, without petrol, with very little ammunition. Our convoys could not venture between mines; Bir hakeim, continuing to resist, we prevented from receiving supplies from the South. We were subjected to constant attacks from the air. Other twenty-four hours and we would have been forced to surrender" <sup>(73)</sup>.

The speech, as reported, is a confused and inaccurate summary of events over several successive days. And continuing as long as it was frequently accepted uncritically. It's easy to detect that no longer Crüwell commanded the *Afrikakorps* for over a month; that his capture was the 29th; that Nehring had assumed command

The battle of Gazala (31 May)

LA BATTAGLIA DI AIN EL-GAZALA  
(31 maggio)

SCHIZZO 32



the DAK Crüwell departure for Germany on leave; that will hurt the Gause June 10, as Westphal; that on the evening of 31 May the situation was now clear: the stronghold of Got el-Ualeb had the hours numbered. The only doubt - founded doubt, provided that based on radio intercepts related to the strong British attack waited for that same night. To say, therefore, that "*both [Nehring and Bayerlein] implored Rommel to suspend the action, but he would not listen to us*" does not seem to have much sense. At that point what else would Rommel do? On the other hand, just on the evening of 31 Rommel wrote to his wife: "*I'm fine. The most critical moment of the battle has passed and so far everything is fine. But the next few days will still be difficult.*" It is far more likely that the gist of the speech-the suspension of offensive-both to be placed in the evening of 29, *since according to von Mellenthin "the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup> the Afrikakorps was getting desperate"*.

At 22:45 of the 31<sup>st</sup> were issued the latest arrangements for the conquest of Got el-Ualeb. The operation was the responsibility of the inner circle: from the north the 15th Panzer, 90th Light from the East and from the South the Trieste. Beginning at dawn on June 1. At 08:00 would intervened the Stuka. The result of the fight had problems, though "*the DAK, the XX Corps and 90th Light held ready to start, on special order, within two hours, the counterattack in the general direction East or North*" as prescribed by the orders of the army.

The dramatic situation of 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade, whose Commander will fall during the fierce resistance, was definitely undervalued by both Ritchie and Norrie and the 8th Army ran for cover too late. Of course there was an explanation. Lumsden, who had collected the remnants of 1st and 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., was very wrongly impressed by the sustained fighting on 30 May, having witnessed at first hand that a daytime attack led by only tanks, even if backed by a strong artillery, was intended to break badly against a robust anti-tank deployment. Consequently, in his view, it was necessary to attack with infantry and at night to clear any mines and to capture anti-tank pieces. After this preliminary stage could launch armored units with probability significantly lower losses.

During the May 31 two considerations led Auchinleck to revise their ideas about the overall situation. First: by now was convinced that Rommel did not think at all to withdraw. According to: the consistency of the Italian-German armor should be about 200 medium tanks, i.e. a little less than had remained

with the 8th Army. In such circumstances, inevitably all the infantry tanks were to be thrown into the fray against the Axis armored divisions; on the other hand, without the support of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp never would have had the ability of penetration required to break the lines of the XXI Italian Corps. Truth be told, was coming on the battlefield the 1st Arm. Bd. with 150 tanks, though it was meaningless units training together.

Were also emerged to mind thoughts of Ritchie, who sought to begin to reduce the amount of armored forces of the Axis-to avoid, among other things, a sudden surge of Rommel in the direction of el-Adem and advanced base Belhamed-attacking as soon as possible to give a hand to the 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade. According to his plan, the English 69th Brigade was down from northern to seize Hagiag es-Sidra and 10th Indian Brigade to move from the area of Bir-el Harmat with goal of Got el-Aslagh. Then, broke the screen, anti-tank armored formations they broke-up. At the same time, the 1st *France Libre* Brigade was supposed to occupy Segnali Nord with a strong tactical group. The operation was to begin the night on June 1, which premise to a general counter-offensive. Naturally, when faced with similar lack of time, the two Corps commanders demanded and obtained a delay of 24 hours.

The Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army could not hope for surprise provided German messages of the 31<sup>st</sup> by *Ultra* decrypted had revealed that Rommel was aware of British design to attack that night and had prepared for the impact; In addition at 06:00 of 1 June were intercepted the *Panzerarmee* that would turn the Italian-German armored divisions to counterattack eastwards or North, but Ritchie is not broken up.

At 05:30 the 1 June the Axis forces placed on the bases for the concentric advance after operating an intense aerial bombardment and artillery. The fight was fierce:

“The attack ended only in the early hours of the afternoon-the historical diary of XX Corps, with the complete destruction of the enemy’s mass, with tenacious enemy resistance to the last man, even employing grenades and pistols. Many dead and wounded. *Trieste’s* losses also are notable; among the fallen was Col. Chiapuzzo, Commander of the 66<sup>th</sup> infantry”.

Were captured more than 3,000 prisoners; destroyed or captured 101 tanks and 124 guns of various caliber. Among the Germans injured were the two main contributors to Rommel: Gause, Chief

Staff of the *Panzerarmee*, and Westphal, the head of the operations office. To replace Gause, Rommel called on Col. Bayerlein, Chief of staff of the DAK.

The loss of the 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade and 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade changed basic conditions which was the English plan, nonetheless Ritchie said too on. The result was disastrous: the 69th Brigade, of which only one reinforced battalion acted, failed to get on the objective and the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade faced such a sandstorm that Messervy, to coordinate action, decided to cancel everything.

The rapid conclusion of the fighting of Got el-Ualeb allowed Rommel the already planned next step. In the afternoon, he made a short tour of the divisions and ordered Azzi and Kleemann to take by night East of Bir Hakeim, a shot of the Divisional artillery, and to attack at dawn. The garrison, the two divisions had to return to the North, leaving in place a battalion of the *Trieste*, to be replaced as soon as possible by X Corps. As you can see, for Rommel it was fixable issue with little expenditure of time and forces. Evidently hadn't asked De Stefanis for information.

The *Ariete* remained practically inactive; on the other hand had to suffer as long as mains skewer from enemy artillery fire coming from Bir-el Harmat, reoccupied by the opponent, which is why De Stefanis requested to make a small retrograde movement. The losses of the XX Corps were beginning to weigh. Just wear around the 30 May is translated in the following figures:

| Unit  | Personnel |     |     | Tanks |    | Armored Cars |    | semov. |    | Guns |    |
|---|-----------|-----|-----|-------|----|--------------|----|--------|----|------|----|
|   | k.        | W.  | M.  | D.    | R. | D.           | R. | D.     | R. | D.   | R. |
| <i>Ariete</i>   | 42        | 119 | 89  | 52    | 43 | 2            | 15 | -      | 6  | 5    | 4  |
| <i>Trieste</i>  | 55        | 170 | 56  | 23    | 14 | 9            | 11 | -      | -  | -    | -  |
| Support   | 7         | 21  | 2   | -     | -  | -            | -  | -      | -  | -    | -  |
| total   | 104       | 310 | 147 | 75    | 57 | 11           | 26 | -      | 6  | 5    | 4  |
| Legend: k-dead; w.-injured; m.-missing. D.-destroyed; R.-recovered awaiting repairs |           |     |     |       |    |              |    |        |    |      |    |

Fortunately, by the Comando Superiore came good News: at the base of Umm er-Rzem was concentrating some 40 new tanks available to the XX Corps. Baldassarre sent thirty crews but asked, also in view of the foreseeable future, wear an entire organic battalion, not that the third group from 105 of 132<sup>nd</sup> artillery to compensate for losses incurred by the V Group of 88 and the group of 90. On this occasion signaled the opportunity to reserve the material of 90 from the anti-aircraft defense locations. While the results were excellent anti-tank shot, this one had expressed deficiencies since those early days so heavy that asking the replacement with the material of 88: the size; that made the piece too easily identifiable, and the vulnerability of the towing vehicles. “*Today-wrote Baldassarre-have already been dismantled by enemy shooting three pieces and several others must use folds to ensure the movement as a result of damage to the transport vehicle (...)*”<sup>(74)</sup>.

The period 2-11 June is the third phase of the battle of Gazala and includes the fight into the cauldron-as it was called, for its repeated clashes, the area between Sidi Muftah, *Knightsbridge*, Bir-el Harmat and Got el-Ualeb-and the conquest of Bir Hakeim. For Rommel who now had the security of supplies and the potential retreat route through the passage between the Trigh realized, it was clearly a dangerous enemy pinning maneuver. Bir hakeim, in fact, despite being at the extreme south of the British deployment was a source of concern for the support that was able to provide mechanized elements to affect the rear of the armored army, such a maneuver of envelopment of Italian Corps. For Ritchie it was requiring, directly or indirectly, the mass of the Italian-German operation to dislodge. In the examination of this period we will touch in succession the Aberdeen operation (5-6 June), the battle of Bir Hakeim (2-11 June) and diversionary activities and English disorder.

## **OPERATION ABERDEEN**

The first June Auchinleck and Tedder had sent to Churchill a synthetic account of the early days of the fight, concluding that the battle could not be terminated and that, in fact, one had to expect more heavy clashes. However, “*whatever may be the result*

*there is no doubt that Rommel's plan for the start of his offensive has completely failed, and this failure cost him dearly in men and materials (...)*" <sup>(75)</sup>. Ritchie was always more optimistic: "(...) *consider again the favorable situation for us-he wrote to Cairo on June 2 - and intended to improve day to day*" <sup>(76)</sup>. Truth be told, the Commander-in-Chief, realize that the picture was not as rosy as painted by the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Commander: "(...) *I see with great concern, - he said-the destruction of the 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade and the gradual consolidation of a wide and deep between enemy wedge at your location. However I am sure that there are factors known to you, that I'm not aware*". Then clarified: If Rommel had consolidated in Hagiag es Sidra-Bir el Harmat- Mteifel el Chebir, the entire position of resistance from Gazala to Bir Hakeim was untenable although the axis offensive was not continued. If, on the other hand, wanted to regain the initiative could do it without any difficulty and quickly. This he could not afford.

Consider the three possibilities that are offered to Rommel-attacking the southern flank and rear of the 50th Division, or Bir Hakeim, or raid the depots to the East of el-Adem-the easiest way to reverse any threat was to launch a counter-offensive in the direction of Temrad-Tmimi and occupy South Segnali to disrupt its supply lines. Since the axis tanks did not have the gift of ubiquity, the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp could fight their way with 70 Matilda of the 32nd Tank Brigade, a strong artillery and Infantry Division in mobile reserve. In this regard, Auchinleck took as a veiled rebuke: "*I am a bit perplexed on the dispersion, apparently, of the Indian 5th Inf. Div., but most likely it is more apparent than real*" <sup>(77)</sup>.

There was also an alternative, but the Commander motioned it not. It was to take advantage of the fact that the location of Alam El Halfa was next to the supply line and clearing of the XXI and X Corps. A powerful blow to the South, against the divisions of Gioda "*whose morale was almost certainly mediocre*" <sup>(78)</sup>, could cause major damage.

The letter was visited by Col. de Guingand, head of information, at the command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. Ritchie received when already was examining what to do. The operation, called *Limerick*, in the direction of Bir Temrad to break on the rear and flank of Rommel was at under study for a few days. The environmental climate results from an observation of the Gen. Gott: "*I suppose Ritchie will do something*" he said to

Gen. Ramsden returning from a meeting <sup>(79)</sup>. However, the difficulties which were afloat were concrete. Meanwhile, the collection of the 5th Indian Division and the crowding of the food needed for the action were to take place at about ten kilometers west of Eluet et-Tamar, that is ... at your fingertips of the DAK. to defend the to would took place brigades between Eluet et -Tamar and Hagiag es-Sidra, namely opening the door for el-Adem and Belhamed to the Axis divisions; also admitted to intercept the DAK in his pointed toward the North, was much doubt that British Armored units could hold during development of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp's advance; Lastly, the organizational phase would require too long at the expense of secrecy. In essence, the design was rejected. *"One such maneuver-commented von Mellenthin - led the destruction the Austrian-Russian army at Austerlitz"* <sup>(80)</sup>.

The Gen. Briggs, Commander of the 5th Indian, proposed the large lap around Bir Hakeim to ascend toward the Northwest, in the direction of Tmimi, but logistical difficulties appeared too big: you would have to power the entire 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and accompanied by at least a couple of armored brigades, with the result leaving eerily undefended for el-Adem-the main concern of all – and to find once he arrived in the Mteifel el-Chebir area, Rommel already waiting with all his armored forces. Now, in fact, it was easy to pass from one side to the other of undermined. Instead von Mellenthin was considered very favorably the idea, but if carried to the extreme. The entire 30th Corp (1st and 7th Arm. Div. and 5th Indian Div.) had to carry out the turning from the South, swooping behind the Italian X Corps to attack Rommel from the West while 13th Corp would move down from the North with the 32nd Tank Bd., the 2nd South African Inf. Div. and 10th Indian Inf. Div., with flow from the frontier. *"It's very true-he wrote-that the Afrikakorps could react by pushing on Tobruk or Belhamed, but in this case the Panzerarmee was hopelessly divided and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army could destroy the Crüwell group before returning to deal with Afrikakorps. This is one of those very risky plans on paper and therefore discarded by cautious, but if it had been implemented with resolute Audacity I think would have shattered the Panzerarmee (...)"* <sup>(81)</sup>. The opinion seems rather questionable, however certainly not acceptable for Ritchie's mentality.

Besides on 2 June the 21st *Panzer* was thought good to make a push toward Eluet et-Tamar. He found the remains of the Stopcol group, with sixteen *Valentine* of 8<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, and threw them back in disarray on Acroma. Then



he received the 4th Armored Brigade, sent to block the incursion. This, shut down by a violent sandstorm, was able to intervene only in the late afternoon in a confused fight, so it was “*a bit too scattered-admitted Lumsden-and one of its regiments was beaten*”<sup>(82)</sup>. The 5th *Royal Tanks* lost twenty Grants remained with a single Grant and two Stuart; the 3rd *Royal Tanks* they lost four.

It remained that try to eliminate the Italian-German salient, the “CAULDRON”, according to the suggestion of Messervy. The project, called *Aberdeen*, was based on an attack of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp to punch straight-ahead, led by East against the deployment of *Ariete*, anti-tank troops regarded with so much respect (perhaps as long as deemed to be ... German, due to the presence of 88 pieces) from the 8th Army, which in the information bulletin, June, for the first time, put in evidence the importance and fearful as screen. Opened a passage on Got el-Aslagh, armored forces had raided “*going behind the enemy lines*” and closing gaps in the minefields. Meanwhile the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp would put in place a essentially diversionary action, tending to occupy Hagiag es-Sidra.

Also in this regard, objections arose more or less established, however the plan was outlined to Auchinleck as a pincer movement. From a tactical group of the 69<sup>th</sup> Brigade and the 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Brigade for earn Hagiag es-Sidra; from the East the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division main effort. Starting from Trigh Hakeim, the 10th Indian Brigade, supported by 4<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, had the task of opening a gap of about five kilometres between the northern end of Got el-Aslagh and Bir et-Tamar (sketch No. 33). At dawn the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade would pass through the wide threshold and would have reached and surpassed Sidi Muftah, thus being more or less equidistant from open mined gates of the *Brescia* on Trigh Capuzzo and *Trieste* on the Trigh el Abd. Soon after would be penetrated the 9<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade with 4<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, settling at the earliest opportunity to defend. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade would have blindsided the part of the DAK committed on Hagiag es-Sidra from units of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp.

On the consistency of the Axis forces there were incorrect ideas. According to an incorrect report of British aerial reconnaissance, 180 German and Italian tanks were located west of the minedfield and only 120 in the *Cauldron*, which is why the 8<sup>th</sup> Army held that 21st *Panzer* was withdrawn into the X Corps sector<sup>(83)</sup>. Another interpretation considered absent the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* as committed at Bir Hakeim<sup>(84)</sup>.

*"If everything had gone as planned-observed Carver-the whole*

## IL PIANO DELL'OPERAZIONE «ABERDEEN» (5-6 giugno)

[illegible]

the area occupied by DAK and *Ariete* would be manned by British troops; but the large arrows on maps of the designers actually showed a number of inexperienced, battalions poorly equipped by anti-tank weapons, which were to travel aboard vehicles or walk miles of open desert to preside over very distant goals among them”.<sup>(85)</sup>

It is interesting to mention the strange command organization. Ritchie initially felt to leave Aberdeen to Gott, but when faced with protests of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp's Commander, which did not see why he should bear the responsibility of Ain el - Gazala and the operation, gave the task to Norrie, who “*decentralized* it”. The breakthrough of the positions of *Ariete*, by the Indian 10th Brigade was under the direction of Briggs, Commander of 5th Indian Inf. Div.; the all out intervention of the 22nd Arm. Bd. and the host of the Indian 10th Brigade were under the control of Messervy, Commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div.; the use of the Indian 9th Brigade and, from that moment, the deployment of the 10th Brigade became Briggs competence; the action North of 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. returning to Messervy. It is true that Messervy and Briggs knew each other well and established a single tactical command, but if the whole action had been in the hands of Norrie probably would be led more unity.

Auchinlek prompted Ritchie to hurry:

I don't think, I guess, to postpone the offensive only to synchronize with the departure of the convoy [to Malta]. I think it should be launched as soon as the tactical situation permits on your front. The first result of a successful offensive will be to deprive the enemy of landing strips in the Martuba-Derna area. The second, and even more important, it will allow the use of these landing strips for our aircraft, significantly increasing the protection of convoys. Soon we will be able to achieve these results, the better will be (...)”<sup>(86)</sup>.

But then, at the last moment, advised him to treat very well the preliminary surveys, although this had resulted in a shift in the start and stressed the need to support the infantry with tanks. Ritchie offered Messervy and Briggs another twenty-four hours, but the two generals refused: at that point, might as well start. One of the participants had to say: “the first thing that reminds one of the 5 June attack that was mounted in a hurry. The second thing is the total absence of more precise information on the enemy (...)”<sup>(87)</sup>.

Let's say that Ritchie was so optimistic by offering

decisive goals. Saw the line reached Mechili Tmimi-as the initial step for the reconquest of Cyrenaica. Indeed, he had already calculated forces for exploitation of success: a *Jebel Force*, along the coast, with an Inf. Bd. an Inf. Div., and a Tank Bd; the *Desert Force*, along the Mechili-Benghazi, with two Arm. Bd. and a Mot. Bd. <sup>(88)</sup>.

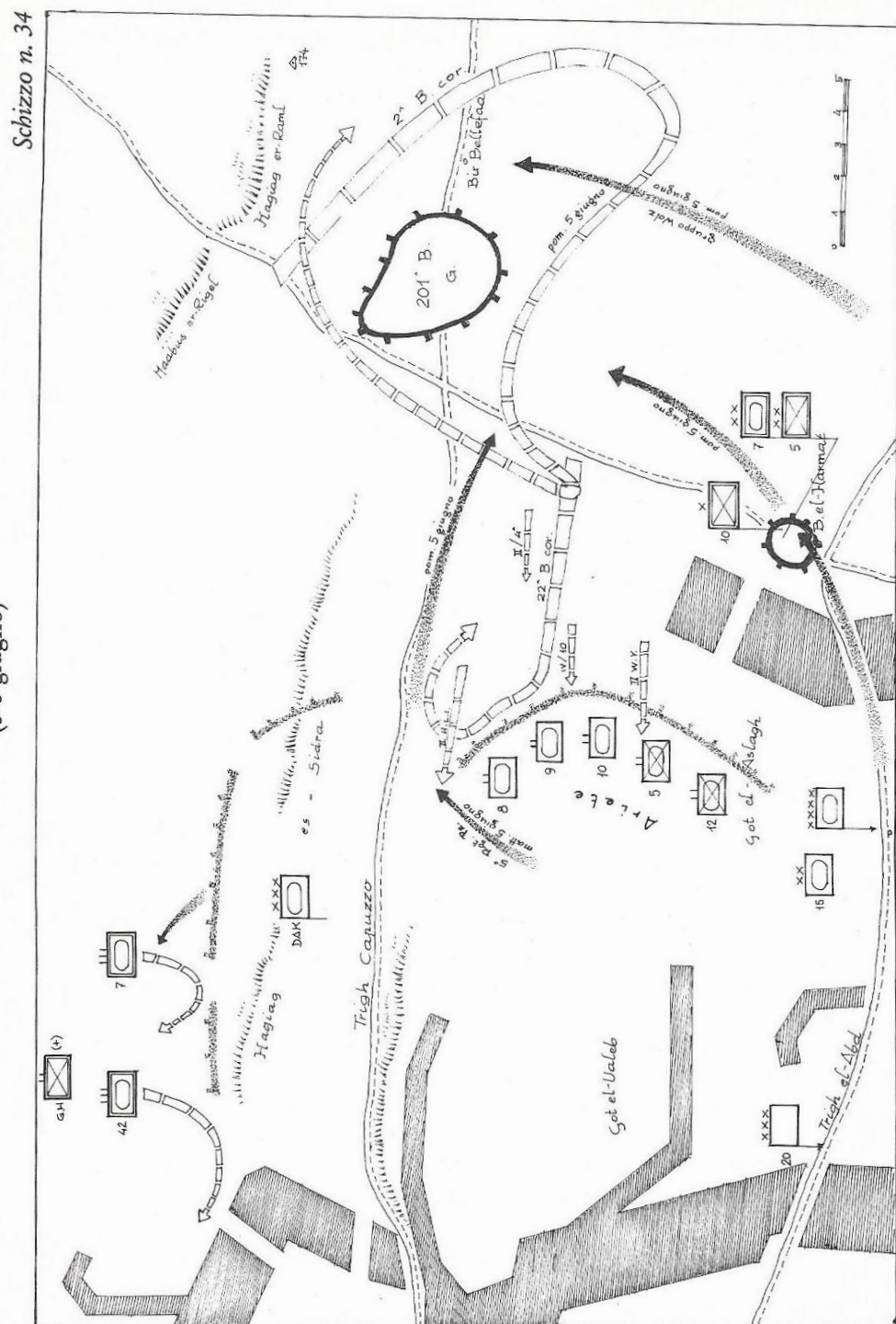
Rommel's attention was concentrated on Bir Hakeim, where they were fighting the 90th Light and the *Trieste*, but had overlooked the possibility of an English initiative. As a result, on June 4 were issued the appropriate measures. The 21st *Panzer* remained on Hadiag es-Sidra; the 15th *Panzer*, collecting in the area Got el Ualeb-Bir Belafarit, was set up in the evening, the establishment of a bridgehead over the minefield six kilometres south of Bir-el Harmat as base for a reaction maneuvered to the Southeast or Northeast on a possible British shock; the *Ariete* had to provide for the withdrawal the deployment, by containing it in the Bir et Tamar-Got el Aslagh. In the afternoon, the Chief of staff of the XX Corps, Col. Ruggeri Laderchi,-was summoned by Rommel, who said the next moves: first eliminate Bir Hacheim, then point to the Balbia to crush the resistance of Gazala or el-Adem.

At 02:00 of 5 June began the British firing preparation. "*If ever an operation could be likened to the gesture of a man who sticks his arm into a hornet's nest, that was operation Aberdeen*" Carver said <sup>(89)</sup>. Were four regiments who opened fire: the 4<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 157<sup>th</sup> artillery with the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and the 107<sup>th</sup> horse artillery of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade. The fire was intense but useless provided fell into deaf ears. *Ariete*, against whose forehead was directed the effort, had already begun the withdrawal of its positions, which now ran along the ridge of Dahar el-Aslagh. The greatest damage was reported by the V/8th Bersaglieri that was substituted north of the Trigh Capuzzo by German units, movement was underway by truck convoy to Got el-Aslagh (sketch No. 34).

When, therefore, at 02:50, began the advance of infantry, the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade (Gen. Boucher) found with surprise that the battalions proceeded towards the objectives without encountering resistance, except for the effects of nearby interdiction fire. There was a pause to the advance the artillery and reorder the units, then the action resumed at dawn to buy space. The 2nd Battalion *Highland Light Infantry* of the 10th Indian captured without difficulty Bir et-Tamar and organized in defense, while

The Plan of Aberdeen operation (5-6 June)

LO SVOLGIMENTO DELL'OPERAZIONE «ABERDEEN»  
(5-6 giugno)



the 2nd *West Yorkshire*, head battalion of the 9<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade (Gen. Fletcher), backed by a squadron of *Matilda*, attacked the central part of Dahar el-Aslagh.

The *Ariete* was willing 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank Regiment to the North and southbound 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri. The anti-tank and field artillery were shared across the sector. The British shock was to coincide with the line that stitches between the two regiments, involving the X/132<sup>nd</sup> tank and V/8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri. The latter, already shaken by the previous bombing, ceded in any centre of fire, but the position of resistance remained essentially intact. At 07:20 Rommel ordered him to move to the dynamic reaction to cleanse the front. De Stefanis was already providing of initiative, whereby Gen. Fletcher, seeing the bad situation and having the 2nd *West Yorkshire* already lost a company, decided to withdraw from the fight. Further north, elements of the 21st *Panzer* pressed towards Bir el-Aslagh.

Meanwhile appeared the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade. *"It is a mistake-observed von Mellenthin-enter armored formation too early in a battle of rupture; in this case, the mixing tend with armored infantry, resulting in confusion and loss of control. This is exactly what happened on 5 June"* <sup>(90)</sup>. The onset of the 22<sup>nd</sup> was unlucky as long as it went to drop under the concentrated fire of anti-tank and field artillery of the DAK and XX Corps from the North and from the West. Eventually, under local counterattack of the *Ariete* and 8<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment*, sent by 15th *Panzer*, and having lost several tanks, the Brigade gathered Southeast of Bir et-Tamar.

At about 11:30 the fight was quelled, but the British situation appeared unstable. This was broken by the events in the North of the Hagiag es-Sidra.

At dawn had moved even the 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Brigade, reinforced by an infantry battalion and a *Valentine* squadron of the 8<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*. Sheltered by a curtain, its smoke went up the slope that led to the German positions. The fire that embraced the *Matilda* was deadly. The two leading regiments, shocked and counterattacked from the Southeast, obliquely to their right but the 42<sup>nd</sup> *Royal Tanks* came against wide mine range, which knew no boundaries, and 7<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* pulled out under the fire of anti-tank pieces. Ultimately, the Commander of 7<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* picked up the remaining tanks of two regiments (a dozen according to some sources, some 20 another) and retreated a few kilometers. 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* now to was free to join with the bulk of the forces on the 5th Indian Division and the 22nd Armored Brigade. Also about this episode von Mellenthin

expressed their thoughts without euphemism: "*from a tactical point of view, this was one of the most ridiculous attacks of the campaign*"<sup>(91)</sup>.

In the early afternoon the 5<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment* began to vacate the land in the area of Bir et-Tamar. The II *Highland Light Infantry*, took to the chest, was forced to dislodge very battered. The episode had followed contentious since 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., also involved in the action, urged it to the West to help the *Scots*. Later Gen. Carr, in his justification, claimed that, according to the explicit orders received from Messervy, he had no responsibility towards the infantry<sup>(92)</sup>. For his part, Gen. Fletcher had to declare in the report written shortly after:

"It seems that existed a total disagreement between the 22nd Arm. Bd. and the 9th Indian Inf. Bd. regarding possibilities and responsibilities of the two brigades. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. it seems to have the idea that a battalion is able to settle down in the desert stronghold in something like half an hour; While the 9th Indian Inf. Bd. believed that the 22nd Arm. Bd. with its 100 tanks [actually were 156] would have the task of destroying the enemy tanks in the area where it was used. In practice, it seems that the 22nd Arm. Bd. has not even tried to give help to the II W. Yorks, when it was attacked by 40 tanks and 17 armored cars [this was the counter-attack of the *Ariete*]; and when the position held by the II *H.L.I.* was attacked by 40 tanks [was the counter-attack of the 21 *Panzer*], the 22nd Arm. Bd. began a slow retreat (...). The infantry must act with the tanks, they must be trained with them"<sup>(93)</sup>.

Meanwhile, Norrie had placed in to motion the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. (consisting of a tank Regiment, a motorized battalion and a horse artillery regiment) from Eluet et-Tamar northeast of Bir-el Harmat, so merge with Messervy's forces. In addition to a number of uncertainties and setbacks, culminating in the error of directing northeast of *Knightsbridge*, it did not have the opportunity to participate in the fight, especially when unleashed the great Italian-German counterattack.

Around midday, Rommel had hardly realized that operation *Aberdeen* would have been carried out, partial failures and given loss. As a result, decided to annihilate enemy forces "at and North of Bir-el Harmat". Beginning at 17:00. The tasks were so assigned: the 21st *Panzer* was to move from West to East, parallel to the Trigh Capuzzo, in such a way as to ensure the northern flank and close the bag. the *Ariete* had to reach the Bir el Aslagh alignment-the eastern edge of the minefield, to form the bottom of the bag; the 15th *Panzer* was to cross the minefield by exploiting the gap opened at the el-Abd and Trigh reach

Bir-el Harmat first and then Bir Bellefaa; the Wolz group (consisting of 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn, a *Panzerjäger* company and a anti-aircraft unit) should move from the siege of Bir Hakeim, keep to the right of the 15th *Panzer* and take hill 174 of Hagiag er-Raml. Rommel himself would follow the 15th *Panzer*.

The counterattack, preceded by a short bombardment by *Stuka* 's, developed according to pre-established guidelines and the 22nd Arm. Bd., assailed from all sides quickly diverted east of Trigh Hakeim. But if the reaction to the maneuver of the 21 *Panzer* and *Ariete* could be putting into account, the apparition of 15th *Panzer* from gap to Trigh el Abd took the commands all opponents off guard. Bir-el Harmat was defended by a battalion of light infantry just arrived from Baghdad. The 15th *Panzer* arrived like an arrow sweeping away everything. The battalion was defeated in a jiffy; the commands of the 5th Indian Division, the 7th Armored Division and the 10th Indian Brigade were overwhelmed; broadcast centers were captured and every wire and radio link of the entire zone lost; and a messy torrent of vehicles of all sorts took the flight to el-Adem, while, in complete disorder, another wave of *Stukas* pounded the area west of *Knightsbridge*. Until the following day, at the end of the fighting, the British Command cannot regain control of the units.

At 15:10 Ritchie had announced in Cairo that the operation had not been "a total failure" and that the enemy seemed, by some signs, "not entirely satisfied". After the disturbance of Rommel's counterattack, he naturally struggled to reconstruct an acceptable picture of the situation. At midnight reported in Cairo that the opponent had taken the initiative and "*is still not exactly clear what happened.*" He added later that "*the 22nd Armored Brigade undoubtedly is in action in aid of the 5th Indian Division*"<sup>(94)</sup>. In fact, since the afternoon Messervy had placed that the Brigade left a part before the enemy at Bir el-Aslagh and gathered South of *Knightsbridge*, with the result that the clash with the 5<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment* and the 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank gave a accelerated an order in progress. When it passed the Trigh Hakeim had lost 60 tanks and its remains were recommended to scatter until late at night. As for the 2nd Armored Brigade at the time of the raid from the South of 15th *Panzer* it was, as we know, close to Hagiag er-Raml. It was ordered to go to face the German right wing at 19:10, but the rapid fall of the evening led to reunite North of *Knightsbridge*. On the battlefield, from Bir el-Aslagh to the minefield, were the remains of the 10th Indian Brigade



with the artillery regiment and the recon of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade. Around these troops there was the ring formed by two *Panzerdivisionen* and the *Ariete*.

It remained to the British than to try and force action on 6 June, Messervy tried to salvage the three brigades gathered in his hands. The intent was to conduct the 2nd Arm. Bd. North of *Knightsbridge* to attack Bir el-Aslagh with the support of artillery of the Guards, while the 4th Arm. Bd. It would be worn on the left looking at the side. The 22nd “*that it had a very heavy 24 hours*” was in reserve.

Messervy took himself to write in his report: “*everything went wrong that day*”<sup>(95)</sup>. The 4th Arm. Bd. was still at *Commonwealth Keep* to recover from the blow of the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Called to action, it arrived in the late afternoon, a close order. The 2nd Arm. Bd. was conducted in the morning, it seems by error<sup>(96)</sup> towards Bir Bellefaa to eliminate the strongpoint promptly released by Wolz. When he was told to reverse direction of attack, Gen. Briggs, Commander of the Brigade, he raised a valid protest but had to execute the order and go-alone-to stop the 21st *Panzer*, which succeeded in a manner of speaking, as it is difficult to identify who has stopped each other. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. was so depressed and exhausted that, after some orders and countermanding orders about its use, was sent to the North-East of *Knightsbridge*. Meanwhile the troops left in the bag were liquidated by 21st *Panzer* and the *Ariete*.

On the part of the Axis were reported 3,100 prisoners and destroyed or captured 115 tanks, 96 artillery pieces and 37 anti-tank guns. In terms of organic-tactical situation, the 10th Indian Inf. Bd. was virtually destroyed, two battalions (out of three) of the 9<sup>th</sup> Indian had suffered heavy losses, the 29th Indian Inf. Bd., had lost a battalion and anti-tank pieces, three brigades of 300 medium tanks were available on the evening of 4 June had fallen to 132 in the morning of 7 June, the 32nd Tank Bd. had lost 50 *Matilda* and *Valentine* of 70. We still speak to the bitterness with which Messervy summary of the battle:

“Thus ended a disastrous day and an attempt to conquer the cauldron where everything went askew. It is my impression that the operation took place with a few days late. The enemy had just placed and its armored forces reordered; He was ready to resume the advance, I lay exhausted still licking their wounds”<sup>(97)</sup>.

At midnight on the 6<sup>th</sup> Ritchie reported in Cairo “heavy fighting”, adding that, despite not being able to provide details,

He can say that "*the enemy's position isn't too easy.*" And, there were since, expressed the opinion that the day was closed in his favor! The 7<sup>th</sup> at noon he told other news: "*yesterday was a day of heavy fighting, in which we have suffered considerably, but I am convinced that the losses of the opponent are not less.*"<sup>(98)</sup>

Of course, the fight was not over and the situation was complicated by erroneous news or confused. *Knightsbridge*, given by the *Ariete* as occupied in the late afternoon of the 6<sup>th</sup>, was still firmly under British control. Bir-el Harmat, believed to be in possession of 15th *Panzer*, was recorded in the evening in enemy hands. For Rommel the two places were important as long as they allowed an acceptable breath for liquidating Bir Hakeim. As a result, on the morning of 7 June he decided to occupy Bir el Harmat by a unit of the 15th *Panzer*, who at 15:00 was replaced by a 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri battalion, and the *Ariete* to take a position to the Southwest of the cornerstone of *Knightsbridge* "*holding but still able to move southward at the first nod.*" The 21st *Panzer* was to preserve the line of Hagiag es-Sidra and frontage to the West the *Knightsbridge* area, while the 15th *Panzer* was to the North and South of Bir-el Harmat, also ready to head on Bir Hakeim.

On 7 June the *Ariete* counted losses from May 26: 95 dead, 247 injured and 210 missing among the personnel; 102 tanks (including 30 stranded) on initial 177, 18 armored cars (of which 6 can be recovered) and 112 vehicles among the material. And attrition would necessarily increase. In the four days following the Division found itself on the arms the weight of a very strong pressure on the part of the English 7th Arm. Div.. The Divisional rested on two device pins to maneuver: the V/8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri near the Trigh Capuzzo- Trigh Hakeim crossing, around which the 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank uselessly carouseled and part of 15th *Panzer* (the 115<sup>th</sup> Fusiliers was sent quickly to Bir Hakeim on the 8<sup>th</sup>); the XII/8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri at Bir el Harmat, almost isolated.

On the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup> the attack, he stuck to the South between V/8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and the mass of the 132<sup>nd</sup> tank, reason for which the battalion was forced to retreat west of the Trigh Hakeim, opening the road between opposing elements. The 10 a.m. a renewed effort of the 4th Armored Brigade attempted to break the line. De Stefanis considered him the most powerful of those days is the magnitude of the artillery support for the determination with which it was developed. Fire anti-tank guns and tanks and barrage of the Divisional artillery was enough to nip any ambitions and twenty-eight *tanks*-sixteen

according to Liddell Hart-remained ablaze or destroyed before the Italian positions. The losses of the *Ariete* that day amounted to 7 dead and 23 wounded and 24 tanks hit, but almost all can be recovered in a short time. In the report that the demeanor of the units had been "*admirable in every respect*", De Stefanis held to clarify: "*with the German divisions, contact and collaboration are continuous and immediate*". In the evening the rest of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* moved to Bir Hakeim.

## THE CONQUEST OF BIR HAKEIM

When the mass of Italian-German maneuver wheeled back northwards, across from Bir Hakeim there did not remain any. First enemies sighted by the French were not from the large desert area around the positions, but from the North, from the cramped triangle between the two large mined zones. The patrols were from the *Trieste*, sent to open up a gap in the direction of Bir Belafarit. The second contact, if so you can call, took place on the 29<sup>th</sup>: at first the garrison began to alarm, then realized it's a few hundred prisoners of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Brigade abandoned by mass of maneuver<sup>(99)</sup>. Then calm reigned in the area, not disturbed by the arrival of some Italian or German means in the erroneous belief that the site was occupied by the Axis powers.

The 30<sup>th</sup> showed up, visiting, with Gen. de Larminat, Commander of the *France-Libre* Division, convinced that Rommel was beaten; a belief common to British leaders saw that on the 31<sup>st</sup> the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. ordered the preparation of a strong column to go to Segnali Nord as soon as possible. Ignoring the provisions actually issued by Messervy in the framework of operation *Limerick* scheduled for the night on June 10, then postponed by 24 hours and finally reissued as *Aberdeen*. The fact is that the order of operation number 10 of Koenig, drafted on 31 May, begins with these premises:

- “1. Enemy Forces: withdraw from Signals Roundabout [= North Signals].
2. Friendly Forces: the motorized brigade is moving to get Round Mteifel [= Mteifel el-Chebir]. The 4th Armored Brigade must overcome at 10:00 the minefield North of Bir Hakeim.
3. The task of the 1st Brigade: bringing the best of the forces to the Signals Roundabout as soon as possible (...).”

The breach in minefields North of Bir Hakeim, and South of the Trigh el Abd, was to be opened by a French detachment. According to this a tactical group constituted by the Pacific battalion and

minor units left at Bir Hakeim on June 9, as a first step. Not only arrived vehicles and supplies, other units would reach North Signal. To tell the truth, during the night were read contradictory news, anyway, after many difficulties and some air raid, at dusk, the column stopped at el-Mteilim, a Rocky Ridge about 18 kilometers south-east of North.

Koenig was unaware of what was happening in the Cauldron and hesitations and discussions between British leaders. He knew only that the 4th Armored Brigade had not presented to open gates to allow transit and not seeing the trucks needed to move the Brigade. At 16:55 signed the order of operation number 11, always in the idea that the axis forces were in retreat, merely to make subject to clarification of the beginning of the movement. But an hour later he received an alarming message from the Command of the 7th Armored Division: he had to orient himself to suspend any action towards the Northwest. Then followed the counter orders until the cancellation of the mission. Koenig there and then decided to go that night to Messervy to orientate himself with accuracy and clarify their own conditions, but because he was "in the air" to let him know something was wrong; so limited himself to send the British liaison officer. He was lucky, but the said officer was taken prisoner by the Germans along the way.

At around 05:30 on June 2 the 90th Light and the *Trieste*, in two columns made towards the South, proceeding within a V bounded by large mined zones. Soon the 90th Light oblique to the left, overtook the Trigh Hakeim and found itself in the East minefield. This provoked not only the gap between the two divisions, but also a difference in arrival times. The *Trieste* arrived at dawn just north of Bir Hakeim, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, who had to suffer to open a passage diagonally, disposed much later in the East of the position, sending the West a recon group (the 3rd Recon Bn. was sent to oversee the North Signals and the 33<sup>rd</sup> to watch the interval between X and XXI Corps). The South side was essentially unguarded and will remain almost until the end.

At 10:30, two officers sent from Azzi, presented themselves at the outposts. Led by Commander, demanded the surrender on behalf of Rommel. Koenig declined politely, but clearly <sup>(100)</sup>, then summoned urgently the column sent to el-Mteilim and warned the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division to be surrounded.

Nothing remained but the recourse to the solution by force. At about 13:00 the

deployment of the *Trieste* was complete, but due to weather conditions Rommel postponed the attack first to 17:00, then to 18:00. When this took place, doubts about the results of brief artillery preparation, due to poor visibility, and the quick reaction of French fire led to suspend the action.

From 3 to 5 June the blockade was limited essentially to "take the measure" of the stronghold and to soften the resistance with fire. The defenders were very well protected by careful works of field fortification (so much so that the entire June 9 on just 3,600 defenders killed 86 dead and a hundred injured) and outside could count on action, not massive but persistent, of the English 7th Motorized Brigade, got behind the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, and a couple of flying columns very active against the Axis supply convoys.

However, Rommel, realizing that the conquest of Bir Hakeim was not simple affair as initially believed, had decided to avoid the wear and tear of two divisions and by maturing the dissolution of the French resistance with heavy use of Aviation and Corps artillery, concentrated therein. Therefore ordered the encirclement is placed in a position to guard his back. The *Trieste* was deployed from Trigh Hakeim eastward, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light was on the track for Bir el Gobi, to the West were now all three recon groups.

The first attack was launched on June 6 at 11:00 from two battalions of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light on the southern section of the perimeter, pretty much at the limit of the field between the 1st Battalion of the Pacific (that came from void to travel to North, Signals had reoccupied their positions) and the 2nd Battalion of the French Foreign Legion. Arrested after about two hours of fighting, resumed in the afternoon with the support of tanks, but without concrete results. It must be said also that the tenacious French resistance was seen by Ritchie with doubts: after the unfortunate result of *Aberdeen* he was undecided whether to continue or not to take Bir Hakeim, since now the Italian-German armored divisions had a safe and short supply and evacuation route to the rear. Over all it was difficult to feed the besieged garrison. It was Auchinleck who advised him to keep this post still lost in the wilderness.

On 7 June was arranged concentric action from the Axis, with the total commitment of units of the *Fliegerführer*, now available. But had difficulties. The frequent incursions of *Luftwaffe* cost much in terms of aircraft lost without benefit and this led Kesselring to intervene with Rommel

that morning, lamenting the poor coordination of efforts and rising cost of resolving the issue with a powerful attack with tanks. Rommel had no intention of launching the *Panzer* on minefields, so “*we held at Bay with fine words, Marshal Kesselring, which was probably not able to realize the difficulties*”<sup>(101)</sup>. However the beginning of the attempt, initially expected for 09:00, moved to 16:00, then the operation was postponed to the next day, in order to employ from the North two masses formed by forces of Rommel's *Kampfstaffel* and 15th *Panzer*. Ultimately there was a continuation of partial assaults.

On the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> Rommel himself witnessed the attack. The impact was to be launched in North-South direction from both German masses and from the 65<sup>th</sup> infantry *Trieste* under the command of Col. Hecker, with the support of all the artillery deployed in the area, including two German 210 mm. batteries. The 66<sup>th</sup> infantry had the task of settling down to defend the positions attained, facing West, to prevent the French to escape from that side. The XI Tank battalion and the VII Bersaglieri armored car battalion were to provide security on the rear of the device against directions from East. To the South, always with fixing task, remained the Menton Group (formed by 288<sup>th</sup> Inf.) and the bulk of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light (sketch No. 35).

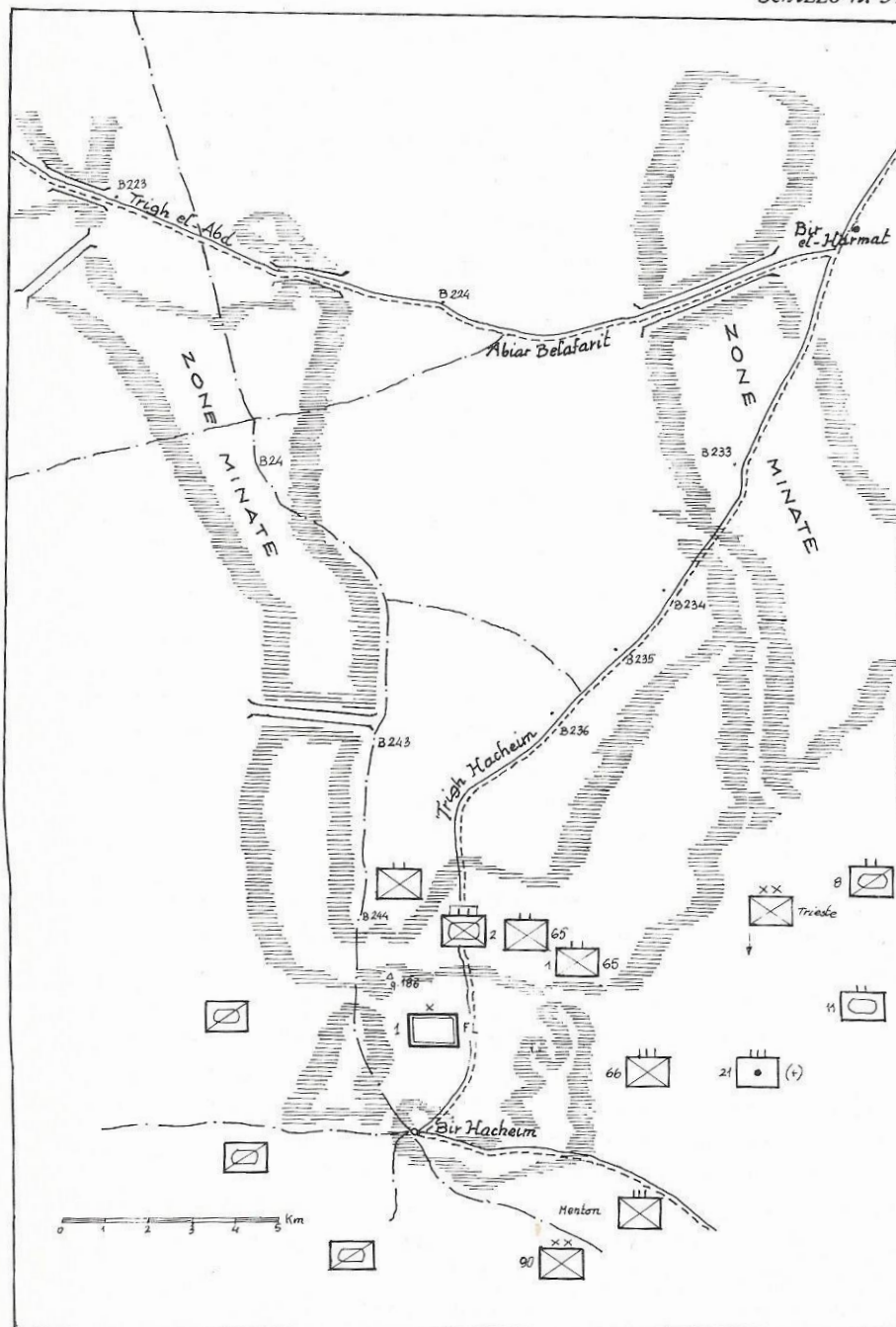
The *Trieste* was beginning to suffer some attrition. On 7 June it had lost 451 men (83 dead, 340 injured and 128 missing), 23 tanks, 24 armored cars, 51 vehicles and a couple of guns. The 90<sup>th</sup> Light was even more proven.

The beginning was not very bright due to the intense barrage of Defense. Koenig reported to 7th Armored Division that his troops were subjected to a severe test and were passing the food reserve. Demanded a substantial support from the sky and breaking the siege. For the time being was satisfied with aviation. Around noon the little progress made by the attackers were halted. At 15:30 Rommel went from Azzi and modified the starting address: the 65<sup>th</sup> infantry had to switch to column formation, with the II Battalion in the first and the I Battalion in the second echelon, to acquire greater force of penetration, and the 66<sup>th</sup> infantry leave positions and participate in the action pointing in the direction of the Fort of Bir Hakeim. The Hecker group, meanwhile, was to exercise the new effort astride the Trigh Hakeim. The attack will end, said Rommel, or surrender of the enemy or the onset of night. In the latter case it was necessary to settle with double facing north and South, silt up and be ready to go to the next morning in the same way.

Bir Hakeim (8 June)

BIR HACHEIM  
(8 giugno)

Schizzo n. 35



At 17:00, then fighting resumed after a new incursion of *Stuka*, and soon the struggle became fierce. Three commanders of the rifle companies of the 65<sup>th</sup> infantry, of six, fell in a short time, but eventually the defense perimeter, in the north-western part of the area entrusted to the II march battalion, was aside. It was the first serious penetration, though not a sequel was immediately, given the exhaustion of the infantry and the appearance of the *Western Desert Air Force*.

For the first lights of 9 June was planning another bombing at the hands of the *Stuka*. For lack of visibility the planes could not intervene and while artillery pounded French stations, Col. Hecker was wounded. It seems that Rommel has seen uncertain on the continuation of the siege, given the modest progress, whereupon he would ask for a reinforcement of mechanized troops by promising the breakthrough on the north side of the stronghold. Rommel consulted with Bayerlein, then ordered the intervention of Col. Baade, Commander of 115<sup>th</sup> rifle regiment, just arrived, with at least one battalion. Meanwhile came the *Stukas* that again overwhelmed Bir Hakeim with bombs.

The resumption of the attack, in the afternoon, attended the entire rifle 115<sup>th</sup>. The fight was acrimonious and lasted up to 17:00 ending with the German occupation of hill 186, a position of the Northwest sector of particular significance for the purposes of the conquest of the entire structure. Now the garrison was on the ropes. Ritchie understood and, given the lack of incisiveness of mobile columns, did say to Koenig that no longer required the possession of Bir Hakeim, one could think of a more rapid evacuation possible.

It was really now, provided the following day renewed attempts began to get local successes despite the courageous zeal of the defenders, interventions by the British aviation and the action of the 4th column, *Primerose* Armored Brigade, on the rear of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light. At night fall the situation was critical and that night on 11 June the French opened up a path forcefully through the Briel group, heading south. Rommel was later to learn, with which his aversion was imaginable in the stretch where the breakthrough had taken place the siege was complete, despite the orders given. Moreover, it should be noted that, for the explicit admission of Koenig, however the sortie had been carefully arranged the execution was far from adequate. It was enough the disappearance of a few commanders to create confusion



and throw the units into disorder. This provoked a natural fractionation of the units and small group infiltration: the best tactic to get out of that quagmire <sup>(102)</sup>.

At about 07:00, 2,600 survivors made contact with a British column that awaited them southwest of Bir Hakeim. At noon, were at the border. According to the French source, losses of Koenig amounted to 1,304 men: 129 dead, 190 wounded evacuated and 984 missing. Rommel announced the capture of 500 prisoners and much war material.

## THE ENGLISH DIVERSIONARY AND NUISANCE ACTIVITIES

Until 7 June Rommel's attention was focused, naturally, on the cauldron, then shifted to Bir Hakeim. But the British had tried to procure elsewhere concerns the opponent specifically to carry the offense on his rear. The possibility existed that the development of the maneuver had highlighted the vulnerability of the two Italian Corps of infantry and the entire flow of supplies.

The deployment of the XXI and the X Corps had come in a certain way to fit the British defensive, accommodation close to minefields. The first one was sprawled on a 20 km-from the sea up to just south of Alam El Halfa-a cornerstones of battalion, on the back of which was the deployment of artillery. The second one was arrested in the North and East of Mteifel el-Chebiri. Between the two corps had created a range of more than seven kilometers, and initially controlled only until 2 June by the 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, posted that day west of Bir Hakeim.

While Navarini had no major defensive concerns, Gioda was forced into three fronts: North to block penetration from the vast no man's land between the *Trento*, the right wing of the XXI Corps, and the *Brescia*; eastward against elements of the English 150<sup>th</sup> Brigade (as long as it lives); South and West against mobile columns of the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade. The assignment to X Corps of the Hecker Group <sup>(103)</sup> no longer claimed to guard against the landing to the East of Gazala, he allowed first insertion between the Trigh Capuzzo and Trigh el Abd, to the joint of the *Brescia* and *Pavia* divisions, then it was moved to the right of the *Pavia* to try to connect to *Trieste*, bustling through the mines towards Bir Belafarit.

Until day 4 operational commitments were limited to

patrols and artillery on both sides. The morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>, in the sector of the XXI Corp, there was a good hour a well-prepared attack and better supported against the II and III/61<sup>st</sup> infantry of the *Trento*. It was clear very soon be isolated actions carried out by a tactical group of *Royal Natal Carbineers* of the 1st South Africa Brigade, but it was isolated, it obtained a considerable and probably unexpected success. After a couple of hours of combat, the *Carbineers* retreated under the protection of the smoke screen, bringing with them fifty prisoners. This raid had a certain influence on Ritchie's plans, provided him to reconsider with new favor the possibility of an attack launched from the left of the 1st South African Division at Temrad, in conjunction with a serious effort on axis communications.

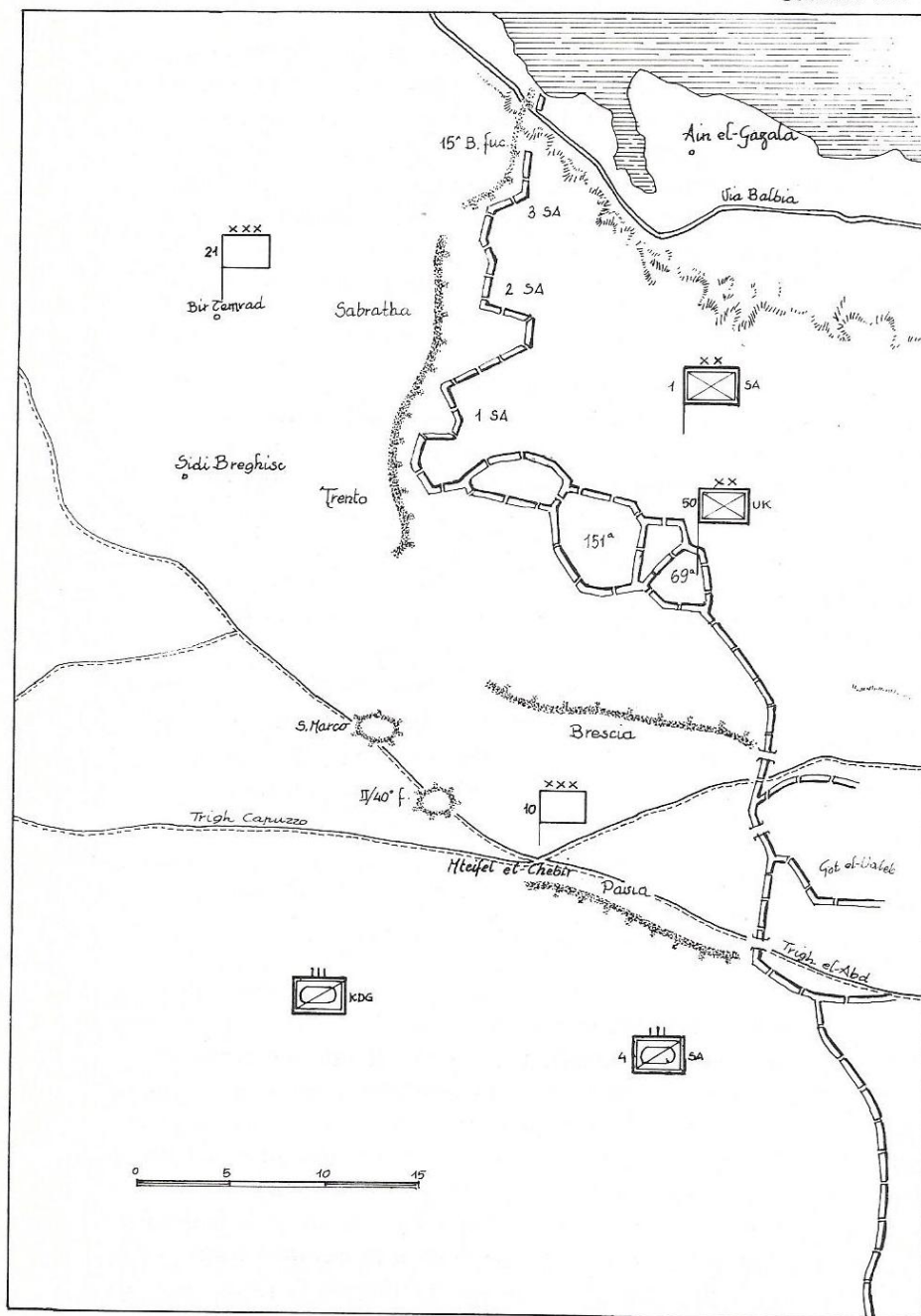
On 6 June, then, Ritchie attended Auchinleck's own idea of a thrust westwards just that night “*with the aim of hitting on the back of the enemy positions on the Gazala-Alam Hamza and proceed in depth*”. Such enthusiasm seems strange. First of all the South African invasion had not gone over the line of strongpoints and, all in all, its happy outcome was contained; Secondly, much greater effectiveness would show a penetration Southwest aimed to Trigh Capuzzo, behind X Corps (sketch No. 36). However, on Gen. Gott that the South African 1st Division to attack the enemy concentration “*in the area between Temrad and the coast. Will be used until an entire Brigade and the formation will remain outside the lines and continue to harass [the enemy backline] (...). The operation will take place this night as a night action. Temrad can be found in the area some enemy tanks (...)*”<sup>(104)</sup>, then went to Gen. Pienaar and discussed with him on the topic.

Pienaar had aroused some doubts and criticism as a Brigade Commander, during the first phase of operation *Crusader*, the extreme caution that had characterized his moves. However, the design offered more of a reason to doubt. The Italian XXI Corps-whose total strength was estimated about 12,000 men-was in place for a week, he was placed on defense with pillars and minefields and his artillery was formidable, as the *Carbineers* had got to try. Therefore, not only a real complex action could not be organized in a few hours, but even a big raid. Sending a brigade at night, without prior reconnaissance, without precise agreements with artillery and aviation, with the certainty to bump into minefields, in essence was an adventure. In addition, admitted and not entirely granted to lead

The Front of Gazala (7 June)

IL FRONTE DI AIN EL-GAZALA  
(7 giugno)

Schizzo n. 36



beyond static defences, there was wondering how would the Brigade in question not be overwhelmed, isolated as it was, and come back.

Pienaar summoned the main suborders and then went to turn from Gott. You ignore the meaning of the interview, however, the final plan was based on an attack by each of the brigades: the 3rd Brigade at 04:45 of 7 June, the 2nd at 05:00 and the 1st at 05:30. The aim was to bring on an alignment from three to seven miles back to current positions, across the front. Later, a tactical group consists of two reinforced companies, a dozen armored cars and a field battery, would be passed along to carry out raids against enemy communications.

As you can see, one divisional action had passed to three distinct efforts into space and offset in time. But there's more: every effort of demultiplexed into three brigade was of each battalion, led by a company. In other words, about twenty kilometers of desert nine isolated companies were to launch their ... pinpoint punch. No wonder the disappointing reverse when he ran the operation. Against a few prisoners, the 1st South African Division lost 280 men and "*the whole thing concluded very little-reads the report of South Africa-except a providential encouragement for Italian infantry*" <sup>(105)</sup>. In fact, this sum of small efforts does not seem to have impressed the XXI Corps, which attributed a meaning diversion, intended to stop the reserves and ease the pressure from the other side. Most sectors were those of the 15th *Schützen* Brigade, where the penetration into a cornerstone of the 361<sup>st</sup> Rifle was chased back at close quarters, and the *Sabratha*, 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri in a stronghold. It seems that Gott has been in private expressed bitterness against Pienaar, accusing him of lukewarmness. The 7th Ritchie at noon reported to Cairo: "*last night the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp has attempted to obtain partial results on her front. From the coast to Temrad [the trial] were all unlucky.*" <sup>(106)</sup>.

In the X Corps sector, by the conquest of the stronghold Got el-Ualeb had dropped the need to look East, however the increased threat on the flanks and on the rear was the constitution of a proper South front, although of limited extent, entrusted to *Pavia* and the strengthening of the North, held by the *Brescia*. This was, as well, for three battalions deployed there to seven battalions. But the basic problem, that it was necessary to tackle, was represented by persistent and dangerous solution of continuity between the two Corps. He came to it, of course, but this could be

Unfortunately in later times obtained, to gradually getting better was shaping up the danger looming canal of supply. Ultimately, for a time the enemy had a large opportunity to act with confidence and peace of mind in a no-man's land sufficiently for the raids and two actions were a result particularly happy: on June 5 against the III/20<sup>th</sup> infantry and three days later against the infantry I/27<sup>th</sup>.

The first unfortunate episode took place when the *Brescia* received orders to extend its North West front with the battalions already guarding the gates into the minefield and made available by the take-over of the passages themselves by German pioneers. The III/20<sup>th</sup> came into place, far left, in the early morning hours of the 5<sup>th</sup> and hurries to settle at the cornerstone. At 08:00 about a mechanized tactical mass had suddenly burst on the rear of the battalion and in a brief but intense clash the inflicted loss: 270 among men killed, wounded and prisoners, and nearly all the units weapons.

Research increasingly keen to solve the problem of interval between the *Trento* and the *Brescia*, Gioda decided to assign to the *Brescia* (which already had of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> infantry and 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri) also the 27<sup>th</sup> infantry of the *Pavia*. The latter regiment was to be located Northwest of the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri were, on the left, so as to achieve contact with the IV grenadiers anti-tank battalion that the *Trento* would push southward, just received. However the grenadiers were not available immediately (it was addressed by asking permission to Comando Superiore) and the 8<sup>th</sup> once again the battalion of the wing, I/27<sup>th</sup> infantry, in two hours was invested and devastated. The attacking mass included a part of the *Valentine* of the 8<sup>th</sup> Royal Tanks, the South African Group *Glycol*, a unit of 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon battalion and one of 6<sup>th</sup> South African armored car Regiment, as well as a platoon of the 8<sup>th</sup> *Durham Light Infantry* with Bren-carriers. Italian losses were heavy: about 380 men, almost all prisoners.

On June 9, however, the gap between the X and XXI Corps was closed and the first useful result seen when the II/19<sup>th</sup> infantry, move in the interval, he was able to dismiss easily another episode of mechanized elements.

#### 4. THE CRISIS OF THE BRITISH 8<sup>th</sup> ARMY

The 1st *France-Libre* Brigade closed the second phase and immediately Rommel gave way to the next step. Not that

the decision was taken on two feet. Since June 3, seen influx of supplies to DAK and the XX Corps with increasing regularity, the armored Army Command had studied the further development of the operation, at Bir Hakeim liquidated. Generally speaking, the design is summarized in four points: constitute a mass attack with three German divisions and artillery corps (German too); form a defensive flank to the East, between the Trigh Capuzzo and Bir-el Harmat, with XX Corp; move with the impact mass direction Eluet et-Tamar and beat the British armored forces stationed there (4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade, 38<sup>th</sup> and 42<sup>nd</sup> *Royal Tanks*); achieved Eluet et-Tamar, look to the West with the DAK to attack the rear defenses of Gazala, entrusting to the 90<sup>th</sup> Light protection against attacks from the East. The role of X and XXI Corps was to be limited to counter-battery and demonstrative actions. To avoid unnecessary wear and tear, they would be passed to the offensive only in the presence of symptoms of retreat of the enemy.

On June 7, then the Col. Mancinelli said to the Comando Superiore Rommel's intentions. These judged the situation with absolute tranquility: losses incurred, certainly not very serious, do not allow the enemy to take any dangerous initiative; the conduct of the action by the 8th Army was to provide that still would have presented an opportunity to beat the opponent piecemeal; Italian-German losses were limited and Axis troops maintained high efficiency despite the natural weariness of thirteen days of battle. Thus the conquest of Bir Hakeim had followed a radical intervention against the British Armored units (eastbound) or against the rear of Gazala (northbound). The decision would be taken at the appropriate time.

The orders given by Rommel in the early afternoon of June 11 was the natural consequence of a study already for a week in processing.

According to the German information service of the 8th Army was moving towards a new deployment. Without prejudice to the Ain el-Alam Hamza, Gazala seemed underway a defensive line North of Trigh Capuzzo, from Alam Hamza to Acroma thru Eluet, et-Tamar. To the South, isolated, was the garrison of Bir el Gobi. He sprang the hypothesis of the 13th Corps of Gott withdrawing on Tobruk and the subsequent establishment of a barrier placed at Tobruk and pins of Bir el Gobi. Hence the determination of Rommel to prevent

the renewal of fighting eastwards and, therefore, the retreat of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp.

The position of Bir Hakeim still retained its importance against any enemy movement outreach towards the rear, was entrusted to a garrison with static defense units (I/28<sup>th</sup> infantry of *Pavia*, a 88mm Battery, a German engineering company) and elements for active surveillance of the area (the assault group of Army Command and the 580<sup>th</sup> Recon Bn). All other forces already involved in the enterprise received orders to move to the Northeast, in order to organize in the East of the *Ariete* roughly halfway between the Trigh Capuzzo and Trigh el Abd, in order: the *Trieste*, 15th *Panzer*, the 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light and 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn. The right, however, was to advance until it reached the crossroads of el-Adem. The location unchanged for the 21st *Panzer* (from Sidi Muftah to Sghifet es-Sidra) and the *Ariete* (between Bir et-Tamar and Bir-el Harmat).

Meanwhile in Rome the unfolding of the battle was followed in broad terms, through forced or inaccurate communications provided by Comando Superiore. Entailed a certain impatience that was alternately a sense of fear that things suddenly drop like a rock or, conversely, the hope of a bright victory. In this mood-and subject to the approval of Mussolini-Cavallero had sent a rather odd dispatch to Bastico.

An appreciation of the situation being formulated on the basis of the information received, overall appreciation adhering to reality, were outlined the operational possibilities:

“a. attacking opposing mobile masses; but these undoubtedly would move away and placing ourselves in serious logistical difficulties;

b. outstanding defense of Gazala with actions on the flanks and on the rear, demonstrate some of the armored vehicles, while others meet to mobile forces of the enemy; his success might also create a more favorable situation for the enemy mobile masses; but this cannot be determined *a priori*.”

And so far nothing to detect. Instead, definitely falls in the obvious, and therefore useless, the continuation of the message:

“This place, decision about the further conduct of the battle is left to this Supercomando that on the spot, has more elements to assess agree with Rommel the situation and our possibilities and the enemy. Please communicate appreciation and understanding of this Supercomando” <sup>(107)</sup>.

Much easier - and for the Comando Supremo - would be limited to the last sentence. But being the curious in a telegram sent on the following day:

"While I am waiting for your reply my 31045 yesterday, I recall at your 1/30 Serv. and at my 31051 for information so that under no circumstances ongoing action must become action of wear. Keep in mind the above in point out your intentions" <sup>(108)</sup>.

Just that morning, Bastico and Barbasetti had gone to Derna, where they had appointment with Kesselring to follow three *Cicogne* to Tmimi, seat of Rommel's tactical Command. However, shortly after the departure from Derna, Kesselring's aircraft and Barbasetti's were affected by British fighter. The first was forced to make a forced landing, the second, with wings damaged, returned to the base along with Bastico. Sent another plane to retrieve Kesselring, these came to 18:00, preceded slightly by Rommel informed of the mishap.

Rommel heard reading the telegram to Cavallero of June 2-remembered Bastico-and in response, before getting up, he replied: "*dryly agree, well communicated to the Italian Command that I will stick to its provisions*". Throughout the interview, Kesselring was limited to the part of silent appearance, given the existing tension between him and Rommel <sup>(109)</sup>. In essence, Bastico was able to confirm to the Comando Supremo to reduce losses to a minimum, both at Bir Hakeim or after, and illustrate the predictable summarily of operations.

At 04:00 departed from Rome another telegram, this time elated and very determined:

"896/P/G. dated 4/6/1942. For Ecc. Bastico. Duce my orders to inform you as follows: news from London that British soldiers expose signs of exhaustion. It is time to beat hard. Cavallero".

Maybe it's to put in relation to such a useless energetic stress gesture intended to show to Mussolini that everything was for the best. On the morning of 6 June, Cavallero, sick, received at home Gen. Fassi of the Comando Supremo, which reported on various topics, including the situation in Libya. Heard the telegram of Bastico, Cavallero phoned Gen. Magli, assigned to the Comando Supremo (and, in practice, Vice Chief of G.S.G.), charging him to illustrate to the Duce to report and to underline that "*our logistics situation appears to be mastered by Superlibia and Rommel*" <sup>(110)</sup>, which was considerably



far from the truth. Mussolini endorsed the “directives” result, which confirmed the orientations of Rommel. Wanted to add to his fist, in a last paragraph, the complacency of the Comando Supremo “*to see the consensus evaluation and intentions*” with the Comando Superiore<sup>(111)</sup>.

However on 7 June Kesselring went to Bastico. He was recovering from an interview with Rommel, about the struggle for Bir Hakeim, and spoke for a long time. He was convinced of the opportunity to ask four days of extension to the limit set by the Comando Supremo to end the offensive. This with the aim of achieving greater results, which, according to Rommel, would also be able to culminate in the conquest of Tobruk. The demand was explained by the desire to avoid costly acts of strength and feasibility of obtaining the surrender of the fort to the immediate following the collapse of the 8th Army.

"I found it very optimistic-concluded Kesselring-and I think in this case you can give reason. Given his shady character, you have to let it go. Try to give him advice is dangerous; could do a surge as a capricious and willful horse then who would be affected would be the battle that we must win at all costs and time limits already fixed. "

Bastico replied that in his opinion the operation had to be conducted in three distinct periods: first eliminate Bir Hakeim, then invest Gazala and finally, if all had gone well, one could think of Tobruk. "*We will do so,*" answered Kesselring-*tomorrow I will go to Rome and I will speak with the Duce and Cavallero*".

Under these circumstances, if not skepticism, at least a good dose of caution seems warranted, and report this to the Comando Supremo, Bastico wrote:

"(...) Rommel forecasts cannot be excluded *a priori* but certainly respond to particularly favorable conditions but today don't appear well founded. Having Marshal Kesselring asked my opinion and permission to plead at the Comando Supremo that request, I firstly reconfirm that you must first eliminate Bir Hakeim as quickly as possible fall & tend subsequently to Gazala reverses, also for unblocks via Balbia & decrease current supply difficulties, disturbed by enemy infiltration.

On this necessity I particularly insisted also because it seems that Rommel has the exact feeling total logistic effort, which he claims only for one quarter or one third of the whole thing.

I think that possibility reaching further goals cannot be determined today, but is subject to the condition that you create after detaching Gazala, kept in mind the residual force of armored and mass

reinforcement of the garrison of Tobruk with the troops resulting in the inflow from the Delta. In any case, can also occur exceptionally favorable conditions requested by Rommel, I delivered a favorable opinion on the requested extension”<sup>(112)</sup>.

Cavallero became alarmed. Meanwhile he asked the Comando Superiore News about loss, about the level of efficiency of the armored units - on 2 June had authorized the movement of the *Littorio* Arm. Div. in Berta - and residual logistics autonomy. Then dictated a long memorandum to Mussolini: he remembered the limits of space and time set by the Comando Supremo of the operation was the presence “*of danger several times reported that degenerated into an attrition action*”, pointed to the need to “*consider a sensitive extension of the fight maybe even opposing the initiative more than our own*”, relieved that the battle in progress absorbed many air forces and the detriment of neutralization of Malta navigation in the Mediterranean, and the *Royal Air Force* raids in southern Italy. The conclusion was unambiguous:

“I don't know what exactly Marshal Kesselring will ask. But with regard to the Comando Supremo, which in your person, DUCE, the total liability of that situation, it is my opinion that subordinate, kept the exposed conditions and especially the attrition happened and advanced stocks consumed while the opponent is bringing in reinforcements, the time limit that is imposed on us not to exceed for the continuation of the action in its present form will soon be reached (...)”<sup>(113)</sup>.

What exactly did he mean? It is very difficult to accept a conclusion like that suggests but avoids committing to more submitted to a politician, talked military matters, but that took seriously the rank of First Marshal of the Empire!

Kesselring saw Cavallero on 10 June. He described the situation in Libya for the few axis losses (5% to 10% in men and 25% material in tanks) and for the British those very strong. The air force had lost 20% of equipment against something more of the *Royal Air Force*. Then presented him with the operational program: conquest of Bir Hakeim (which was to take place on the 9<sup>th</sup>); between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> the annihilation of enemy forces “*in the Valley of Gazala*”, upon provision of a defensive flank to the East; between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> defensive front shift until to Acroma -coastal track and advanced of the X and the XXI Corps. between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> British armored forces disposal in the area of el-Adem and Bir el Gobi; between 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> attack on Tobruk and simultaneously pointing to

Fort Capuzzo and eastwards. “*Of course this program requires three weeks to defer for the taking of Malta*” ended Kesselring.

Cavallero was not at all persuaded by the insistence of his interlocutor about the time and hid, finding upbeat data on losses in comparison to those communicated by Bastico<sup>(114)</sup> and, above all, showing the fear that the influx of new British units on the battlefield (the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., the 2nd French Inf. Div., 30<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade and the 1<sup>st</sup> Inf. Div. from Iraq) led to the prolongation of the fighting in Libya and prejudice the operation against Malta. Now it was falling Bir Hakeim and Gazala, but meanwhile the Axis forces were eroding and supplies are running out. Although stocks, as secured Kesselring, was sufficient until 25 June, we could mention the continuation of operations only to conquest occurred the two aforementioned goals, since the development of the maneuver on Tobruk depended on the speed with which they were achieved, and the accomplishments reported against mobile enemy forces. Then discuss the issue seemed premature.

Kesselring objected he need a program and that it was also replied Cavallero to bear in mind the possibility of non-conquest of two initial goals and the danger of being drawn into a war of attrition, who evidently the axis forces could not afford to tackle. In conclusion: without losing sight of Tobruk, was good only for the time being to Bir Hakeim and Gazala, postponing the discussion of the results obtained.

Kesselring insisted, stating the need to battle the armored forces of the Eighth Army. If Gazala had not fallen, the Italian-German army would shut down. However, even renouncing Tobruk, in his view it was essential to lock in a certain way the fort and make a thrust with light forces toward the border to destroy the enemy logistical apparatus.

Cavallero agreed:

“A *raid* to destroy the enemy organizations within the normal framework. The main thing is that, if you will not be able to continue on Tobruk provision should be made for the establishment of a solid face toward the East.” (...),

and that stated:

“(...) You must come to this solid lineup before operating units have exhausted their operational capabilities. That, in the end, depending on

the success of Bir Hakeim and Gazala, you'll see if you can take Tobruk, conquest that we can't today give for sure”<sup>(115)</sup>

Kesselring nodded and begged warn those concerned that the operation C 3 was delayed by three weeks. In essence, Cavallero agreed also on general lines, but absolutely not get caught out by Rommel. For this he was unwilling to grant an extension; for this he wanted to make their voices heard before moving towards the fort. Evidently did not believe such a success, if not dearly. Mussolini instead took confidence and Cavallero had to allow. In return confined goal level Tobruk possible, very possible. The directives transmitted Bastico the same day of the 10<sup>th</sup> were well this understanding and ended with a generic, almost incidental, nod that Kesselring would do about the continuation of the operation, when, instead, it was the main purpose of the visit of the German field marshal and the conquest of Tobruk was the reason for the request,<sup>(116)</sup>

On 9 June, while Rommel was still busy with Bir Hakeim, Ritchie had received the reply of Auchinleck in his letter of the 4<sup>th</sup>, a response that clearly notes the apparent dissatisfaction of the Commander-in-Chief:

“(...) I disagree, however, with the conclusion that the best way forward is to [you] mentioned in the letter, namely to advance deliberately through the *gebel*, pushing the enemy in front of us.

I think the project is wrong because the goal is wrong. Is not a correct definition of the task indicated by me saying that "*the goal of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army is the conquest of Cyrenaica*". I contend that the eighth army's goal is to destroy enemy forces in Cyrenaica (...) so that can establish *quickly* occupy Cyrenaica and thus hold it firmly. I hope you agree with this clarification”<sup>(117)</sup>.

The next day, Auchinleck sent to London two communications. The first thanked for the good news that the 8th Armored Division would be landed at Suez in late June and the 44th infantry, by mid-July. The second contained an assessment of losses on both sides. It was given to know, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had lost about 10,000 men, 8,000 prisoners which probably against 4,000 axis prisoners (including 1,660 German). As for the material, the British damaged tanks, including those still stranded, were approximately 350 against the axis 400 (of which 211 definitely destroyed); the artillery had suffered more damage: 140 field pieces, 10

medium caliber anti-tank guns, 153 of 2 lbs and 42 of 6 pounds against 120 cannons of the axis; the losses of the opposing air forces were more or less equal: 176 British against 165 German-Italian. On the other hand, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had received since the beginning of the battle 25,000 men, 78 field pieces, 220 anti-tank guns and 353 tanks <sup>(118)</sup>. On 9 June the efficient tanks were 254 *cruisers* and 63 infantry tanks.

Although amazed for the disproportion between prisoners and fallen, Churchill made no comments and gave his congratulations for Ritchie. Auchinleck the broadcast his interest but wasn't very satisfied with it. Became clear that the battle was going into the hands of Rommel, although he was not at all a bed of roses. In the days leading up the precious Ultra decrypt, which came after only twenty-four hours of interception, had announced an urgent need of reinforcements and supplies for the *Panzerarmee*: On 6 June it had demanded the immediate dispatch of 6,000 men, On the 7<sup>th</sup> had provided strong levels (40% of all known tanks and 60% of personnel), the 9<sup>th</sup> had ordered that all men fit to promote fighting at the front, the 11<sup>th</sup> had announced the landing of another German light Division). On this basis, on June 11 the information service in Cairo formulated a careful appreciation of the situation, calculated that 130-140 medium *Panzer* in DAK (in fact were 123) and concluded with the prediction of a general attack on Tobruk. Ritchie, however, I think that if Rommel had continued to advance toward the North he would be forced to limit himself to bomb from the air and from the sea near Tobruk, finishing as worn by fifteen days of continuous fighting. Indeed, it was even possible that he would decide to withdraw <sup>(119)</sup>. Therefore prepared a personal note to Auchinleck, who was sent to Cairo the same day from Gen. Whiteley, Chief of staff of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army.

Considering the substantial balance of balance of power, though with a slight advantage for the British, the document stated that "*we need to focus more on moral factors than on those material*". As for an opponent's intentions: "*I believe - Ritchie wrote - the enemy is aiming to strengthen his positioning in the Cauldron with the intention to go on the offensive as soon as possible. At the same time, he hopes that we will attack him on what he considers a strong positions.*" Auchinleck noted in the margin: "*Oh??*" then continued reading:

"If we don't do that, I think he will step up, Alternatively, an attack northward in order to isolate the two divisions of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp positions

of Gazala, or eastward against our communications. Local symptoms exist about its intention to invest in the East and, in my opinion; this is the most likely hypothesis."

All that said, followed the operating design:

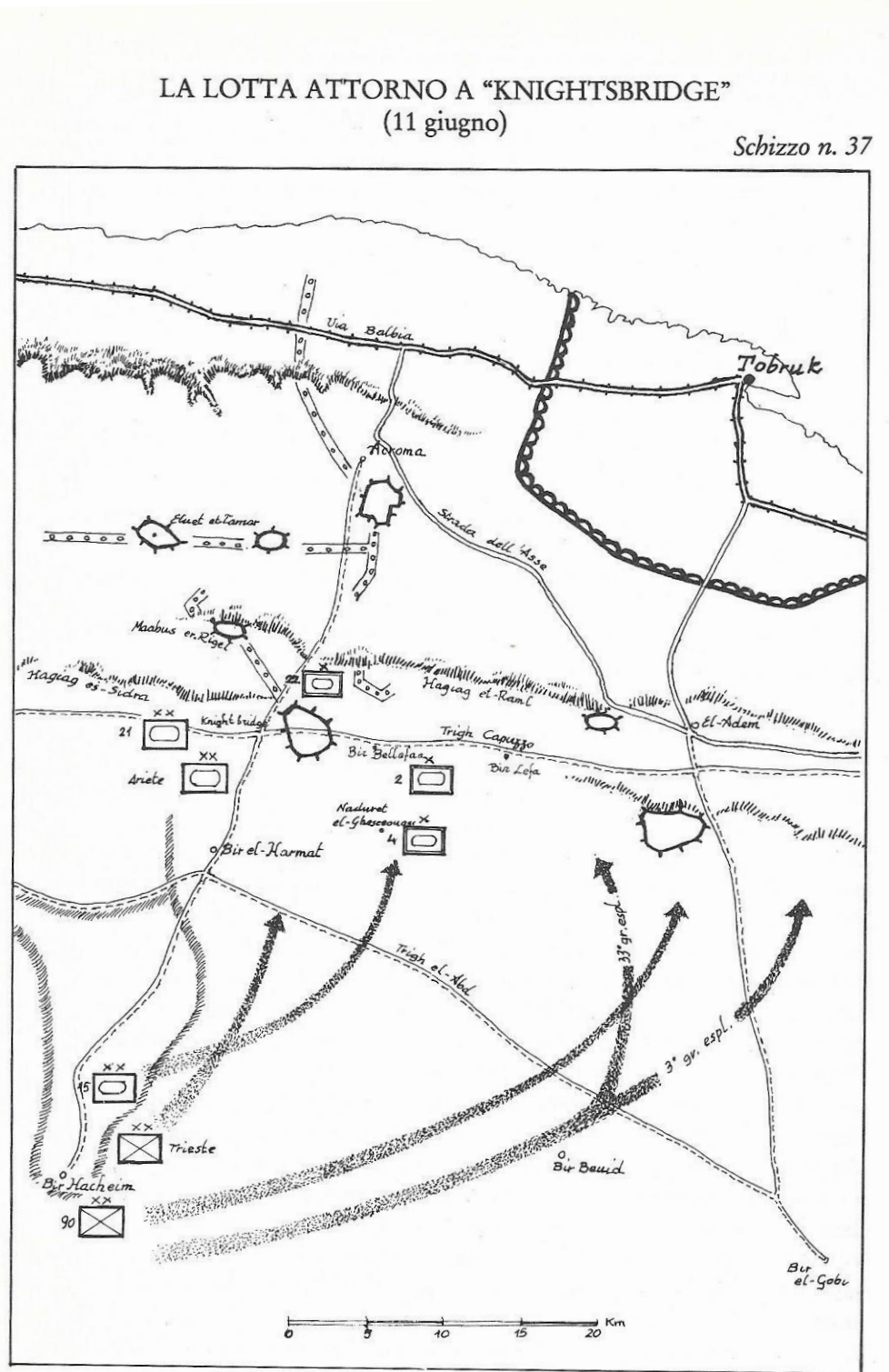
"My plan is to attack the opponent's lines of communication (...) from the North, on the front of the 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div [where] the *Valentine* will be used in support of this attack; from the South with a motorized brigade and as many as can I recover from the armored battle area, without compromising security. At the moment, I can calculate approximately thirty tanks type *Stuart*.

Therefore, I hope to force the opponent to adapt attacking or withdrawing his troops from the Cauldron to defend their own line of communication" (120).

As you can see, the idea of a British inflection formulated by Rommel was the opposite of reality. Ritchie continued responding to some questions put by the command-in-Chief. Feeding the suspicion that the views do not coincide at all, proposed that on 12 June, i.e. the following day, being sent a Staff Officer to provide all the explanations and information necessary. But Auchinleck sent not some. He went himself.

The June 11 the placement of 30<sup>th</sup> British Corps comprised four static structures: the 201<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade just east of *Knightsbridge* with the 2nd Battalion Scots Guards on Maabus er-Rigel; the 29th Indian Brigade on the Ridge South of el-Adem with a battalion on Hagiag Batruna. As for the mobile units, the command of the 1st Armored Division and the 22nd Armored Brigade were located north of *Knightsbridge*; command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division was East of the stronghold of el-Adem, the 2nd Armored Brigade South of the Trigh Capuzzo and the 4th Armored Brigade to the South-East of *Knightsbridge* (sketch No. 37). Informed by aerial reconnaissance of the wide front on which advanced South from Axis forces, Norrie was convinced that excessive disturbance of the opponent would eliminate the secluded 15th *Panzer*. Therefore feel to act separately with the 7th Armored Division. This did not fit exactly in the order of Ritchie ideas, who preferred that fought through the armored support of the fulcrum of maneuver, especially that of *Knightsbridge*, but due to the lack and the belated order sent to commanders began to move on the initiative. So, that morning Messervy had sent to Gen. Richards, Commander of the 4th Armored Brigade, a note: "*in my opinion, the next most likely enemy's movement will be heading from Hakeim to el-Adem and Tobruk to isolate the East*". If that had happened the 4th Armored Brigade

The fight around Knightsbridge (11 June)



had to focus without delay towards the Southeast and face the enemy. However, when he spotted the advance of the 15th *Panzer*, Richards was at Naduret el-Ghesceuasc, a village between the Trigh Capuzzo and Trigh el Abd to its tactical advantage than the southern part, that resisted the orders of Messervy to move and was limited to a cannonade from afar and inconclusive <sup>(121)</sup>. At the onset of evening, axis divisions is arrested in a wedge formation, rather than march with the wing phased out. While the 15th *Panzer* was able, all out, touched the goal, difficulty of travel forced the two motorized divisions to a much slower movement. The connection between the *Ariete* and the *Trieste* was established only in the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup>.

That afternoon a radio intercept had intimated to Rommel that "*the 4th Armored Brigade refused to attack to the Southeast.*" He was "*delighted to hear that the British were considering a similar move*" <sup>(122)</sup> and prepared to take the ball. Dispose method, in fact, that the next day the 15th *Panzer* was on the defensive to wait the enemy while a column of 21st *Panzer* would reach South of *Knightsbridge* to gather behind the attacker. The *Ariete* instead had to remain West of the Trigh Hakeim and the *Trieste* move east of Bir-el Harmat.

On the other hand Norrie ruled that the 2nd Armored Brigade of Briggs (17 *Grant*, 3 *Stuart* and 25 *Crusader*) reached the 4th Armored of Richards (39 *Grant* and 56 *Stuart*) and placed at the disposal of Messervy to throw himself on the 15th *Panzer*, which predictably would offer side and back in its movement towards el Adem. If the 21st *Panzer* and *Ariete* were in action, would be faced by the 22nd Armored Brigade of Carr (27 *Grant*, 5 *Stuart* and 34 *Crusader*) and 32nd tank Brigade of Willison (63 *Matilda* and *Valentine*). However, once again, Messervy, whose 7th Motorized Brigade of Renton had remained between Bir el Gobi and el-Adem, entertain a different design. On the 12<sup>th</sup>, in the early morning, exhibited to Briggs and Richards plans to "*regain the open desert and be free to act against the southern flank of the enemy.*" The two Brigadiers, aware of the orders of the Corps Command, naturally formulated objections and Messervy then decided to go personally to Norrie to advocate his plan. However, in the vicinity of el-Adem stumbles upon a German column (probably the 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn.) and to escape to another arrest hid in a bir, losing the connection with all.

The fight had a slow start and undecided. Changed his view when



the hours without the pronounced English attack, Nehring invited the 15th *Panzer* to make the first move. Unfortunately the stress of men carved into the effectiveness of the action, which waned rapidly. At noon, found the Norrie unavailability of Messervy, ordered Lumsden to assemble in his 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division South-East of *Knightsbridge*, all three brigades-the 22nd, the 2nd and the 4th-and throwing immediately against the 15th *Panzer*.

More or less simultaneously, and while the 90<sup>th</sup> Light reached the axis Road East of el-Adem, Rommel wanted to break the delay and that the DAK defeat the mass of Englishmen: the 15th *Panzer* renewed effort from the South and West by the 21st (sketch No. 38). The first to arrive at the appointment was the latter. It invested the right of the 4th Armored Brigade putting out in the blink of an eye, some twenty tanks. Soon after, at 16:00, turned up the 15th and the Brigade of Richards, literally driven out from the battlefield, he found refuge beyond the Trigh Capuzzo, on Hagiag er-Raml. The action of the 15th *Panzer* was continuing against the 2nd Armored Brigade when Lumsden. He knew only that the 22nd Armored Brigade had been grabbed by the chest, just passed *Knightsbridge*, by 21st *Panzer* reinforced by artillery of *Ariete*. He tried to reorganize the units using the cornerstone of the Guards, but Norrie, who had not made clear the development of events, ordered to break through to the South. However, faced with the growing German pressure and general disorientation Lumsden stopped the 22nd Brigade, unhinged the 4<sup>th</sup> when he learned it was over, and called the 2<sup>nd</sup> to Bir Bellefaa. In the evening, after a confusing and continued fighting, he had managed to some extent to take the 2nd and 22nd behind the Guards Brigade, but about 120 wagons were destroyed or immobilized in the desert.

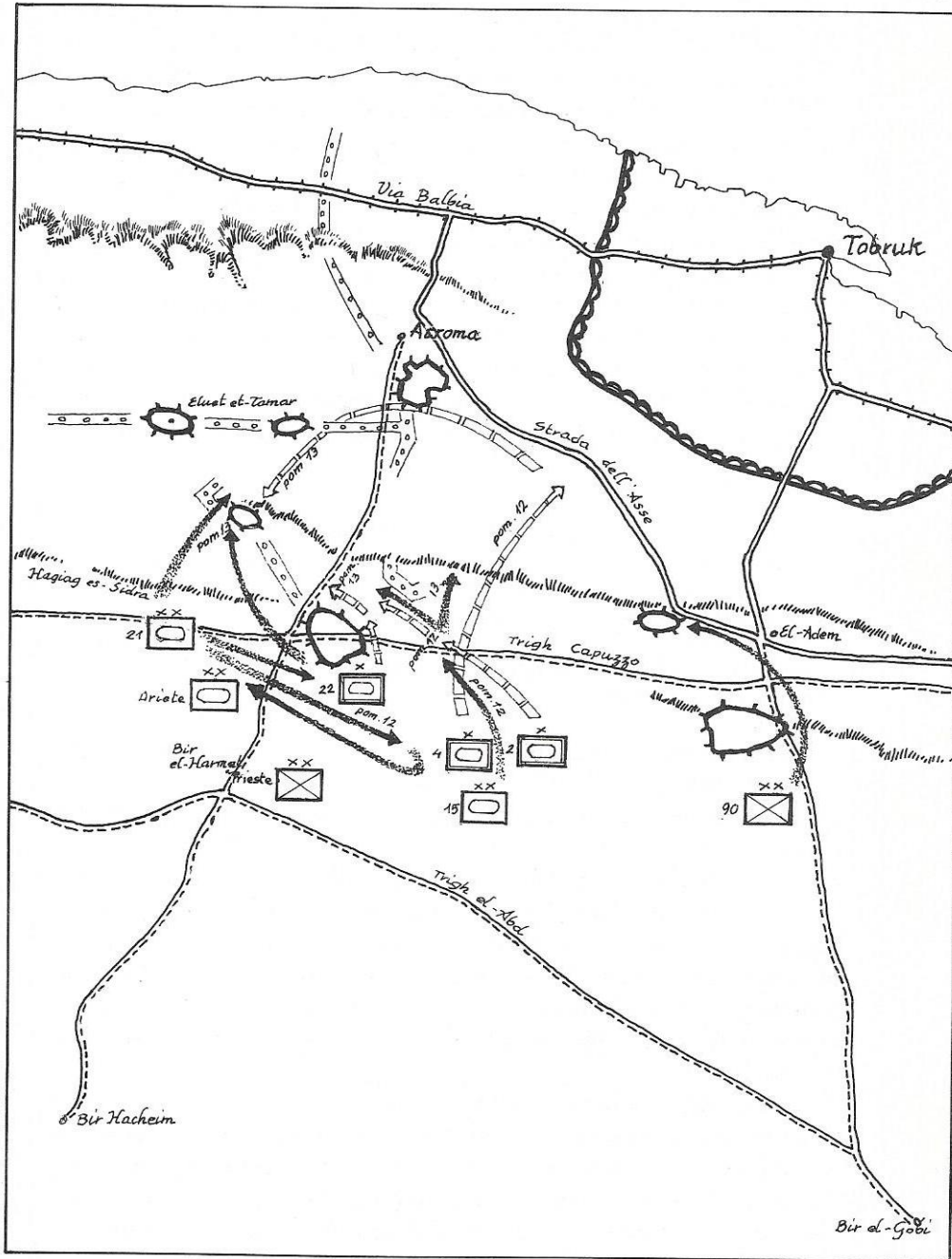
Even the State of broadcasting was disastrous. Norrie was convinced that he had at hand the three brigades of Lumsden and were still able to attack; Lumsden, meanwhile, tried in vain to take the command of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp, after which he told his men to be limited, to the following day, to defend itself in place. At 20:40 received news being passed from 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, but until the following morning was unable to get in touch with Gott.

In the afternoon, Auchinleck had arrived in by air at the command of the 8th Army, where everything seemed quiet: “*good vibe here*-telegraphed to the Chief of the Imperial General staff-*No excessive optimism and the reality of the situation is faced with calm and decisiveness. Morale seems excellent*”<sup>(123)</sup>. Ultra Decryption

The fight around Knightsbridge (12-13 June)

LA LOTTA ATTORNO A "KNIGHTSBRIDGE"  
(12-13 giugno)

Schizzo n. 38



orders sent by Rommel had received the day before in command of the army that morning. According to the information Office, Rommel had returned to the original plan, but trying to make it happen “*with such scattered forces is an act of reckless courage*” and “*a second failure would not be easily be up against with one of those improvisations where the German commander is a master*”<sup>(124)</sup>. But the events ran out of control and evidently the overall picture did escape: the loss of much heavier armor than you thought; a stretch of the Trigh Capuzzo, between Bir Bellefaa and el-Adem, and part of the escarpment immediately to the North controlled by the German side. the cornerstone of el-Adem, isolated, and *Knightsbridge*, become a dangerous salient; the axis Road cut by the 90<sup>th</sup> Light; the land links between the front of Gazala and the Gambut area limited to the via Balbia, passing through the congested streets of Tobruk. It was truly on June 12 to mark the tide of battle.

That day the Comando Superiore historian diary noted:

"Since yesterday there has been the feeling that the enemy, after the fall of Bir Hakeim, has found suddenly facing a very different situation than expected. Tonight, while they cannot give a proper British command, disorientation was noticed that much it as peripheral commands were under the impression of surprise.

Radio intercepts also pointed out nervousness and uncertainty. Division commands ordered to attack these brigades responded by not being able to make it. A similar exchange of orders and of wastage between the Corps and divisions (...)"

Just that day, Ritchie had learned from *Ultra* that Rommel wanted to turn the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp cutting via Balbia soon with British tanks in the area of *Knightsbridge*. Recognized the possibility that we did, Ritchie wanted to rearrange to better the deployments therefore awarded the 1st Armored Division (with the 2nd and 22nd Brigade) to Gott and entrusted to Norrie to rejoin the 7th Armored Division with how many tanks are in the South and East of Tobruk. Had examined with Auchinleck also the possibility to withdraw to the border, where there was the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp, but this was soon abandoned in favor of the continuation of to fight in place.

Considering the likely amount of loss of DAK, the battle could still be carried out by activation of the cornerstones of the company made in previous days by Alam Hamza and Eluet et-Tamar Found so far, the defense tightened in the triangle Eluet et *Tamar-Knightsbridge-Acroma*, the intervention of the

10th Indian Division against the 90th Light and the action of the 7th Motorized Brigade behind Axis units between *Knightsbridge* and el-Adem.

The position of *Knightsbridge* could hold until able to perform the function of shunting pin for tanks and until the escarpments backwaters Maabus er-Rigel and Hagiag er-Raml that remained in British hands. Rommel had appreciated the situation much better than his competitor. For on June 13 decided to eliminate all resistance straddling the Trigh Capuzzo. There were three objectives: the cornerstone of the Guards, entrusted to the 15th *Panzer* with the assistance of a frontal engagement on the part of the *Ariete* and part of the *Trieste*; the cornerstone of the 2nd Scots Guards on Maabus er-Rigel, assigned as a goal at the 21st *Panzer* and the stronghold of el-Adem, objective of the 90th Light.

Let's start from the latter. The Gen. Kleeman was left with a thousand men, fifteen artillery pieces and 40 anti-tank guns: too little to achieve big results. No wonder, then, if, after having placed North of el-Adem, he will see their situation worsen rapidly because of air strikes and attacks by mobile columns. As for the cornerstone of *Knightsbridge*, *Trieste* and attacks of 15th *Panzer* were repelled without much difficulty by 2nd and 22nd Armored Brigade, despite repeated attempts. The resolution of the fighting took place a little further north, on the border. The 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, after an initial failure, renewed the attack and, with help from the 2nd and 4th Armored Brigade, the 2nd Scots Guards had to abandon the position. *Knightsbridge* remained standing but its condition were more than precarious, although the roadway for Tobruk through Acroma and still held open by the tanks of Lumsden. The cornerstone had exercised a function of vital importance throughout the course of the battle, despite having never been directly invested in those seventeen days <sup>(125)</sup>, however it was time of its abandonment and the night Gott had the Guards. At 01:30 of 14 June the *Ariete* occupied *Knightsbridge* and about three hours after the Army Command told DAK and XX Corps “*attacking army northward today to seal the East front of Gazala*”.

"This combat- Auchinleck commented -represented the culmination of the armored battle taking place intermittently since May 27. At its conclusion our armor in the Acroma area were reduced to 30 *cruisers* and 20 infantry tanks, while the enemy was believed to be at least twice as many” <sup>(126)</sup>.

The battle of Gazala and the reconquest of Tobruk may be considered separate episodes, although virtually without continuity solutions, making the first of them on June 15, when the remains of the British 13<sup>th</sup> body found refuge at the border. In fact, the distinction is simply due to the ease of handling of the war, because the abandonment of Gazala and the resistance from the enemy are in close relationship with the British decision about the fate of Tobruk.

As we will see, whereas Rommel's thinking followed with unwavering confidence and safety a straight line in British field contrasts emerged, misunderstandings and misconceptions. In a word: bad discipline of intelligences.

On the morning of 14 June, at 10:00 the DAK was collected just south of Eluet et-Tamar, the 90th Light (released from el-Adem) had brought to the North of Hagiag er-Raml, the *Ariete* occupied *Knightsbridge* and the *Trieste* was prepared in a semicircle from South of the Bir Bellefaa crossroads.

By now it was clear that the British situation was hurtling and already noticed movements of vehicles on the road that Balbia, Gazala towards Tobruk. Rommel wanted to close the bag on the coast, according to original thinking, but called for a tightening of the resistance on the Acroma position intended to allow the retreat of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp.

It was necessary, therefore, to push themselves forward, in haste, and breakthrough.

The optimism of British commanders began to be seriously shaken. Even Ritchie showed now puzzled. On the evening of the 13<sup>th</sup> had arrived from Cairo with Gen. Davy, Chief Operations Officer for the Commandeer-in- Chief, with a letter from Auchinleck-who had also left the 8<sup>th</sup> Army clear enough-not exactly encouraging:

“(…) The staff here during my absence has considered, quite properly, the possible worst case, i.e. your army's defeat and the consequent need to keep border locations to collect on them. There's no sign of defeatism in this and you know that doesn't exist even in me. But it is their task to projects for every possible hypothesis, as of course you know (…)” <sup>(127)</sup>.

In any case, were made available by Ritchie command of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp, to organize the Sollum -Matruh-Maddalena area, and the New Zealand Division as soon as ready. The letter ended with a

“*Good luck*”.

The dilemma of the 8th Army-continue the defense of Alam el-Adem Hamza or abandon them-was a false problem: the opposite of Gazala was being bottled in a bag and

the decision to fight to the bitter end in the area, backed by Auchinleck and immediately warmly approved by Churchill, had to be changed. The recovery of the 1st South African Division and British 50<sup>th</sup> was difficult because the pattern of the fight during June 13<sup>th</sup> had left free to transit to the East only by the via Balbia, however a plan existed. It was the operation *Preeborn*, studied since the occupation of Gazala, months before, and the review of 10 May. Of course was adapted to the present circumstances, however, it was withdrawal to the border and went round each idea to defend in Tobruk. Even this was not easy: the evacuation of the warehouses, materials and accumulated stocks in the fort and near Belhamed would involve a lot of time and the sudden abandonment of the city would probably have allowed Rommel to rush to the border before there was organized a convenient defense.

At 07:00 Ritchie gave verbal notice to Gott of withdraw, then traveled to Tobruk and, just before 09:00, called Cairo, "*in a cautious and rather obscure telephone conversation*" with Auchinleck <sup>(128)</sup>. But, in fact, seems to have been quite explicit: He explained that the fighting on 13 June were unfavorable, that *Knightsbridge* was abandoned, it was not able to hold still for a long time the position of Gazala and had to withdraw. The call then follow a telegram: "*In these circumstances it is my opinion that there is no alternative but to take away the 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa and the British 50<sup>th</sup>*" and added that he pledged to withstand on the western perimeter of Tobruk (with the 2nd South Africa) and in the area of el-Adem (with the 10th Indian Division and the tanks available) until the development of a consistent Corp at the border. It was believed that Rommel was able to attack Tobruk a short deadline and, given that the fort had one month of supplies, had in the meantime to reestablish the situation and save so all large depots. On the other hand, the alternative is to accept the reduced likelihood that the line el Adem not Tobruk to take and then Tobruk were besieged or "*to go all the way*", i.e. abandon Tobruk and move the border. And concluded: "*Agree with me in accepting the investment risk of Tobruk?*" <sup>(129)</sup>.

The message was sent at 10:30, ten minutes after the formal order to 13<sup>th</sup> Corp to leave the line of Gazala, and came to the Commander-in-Chief at 13:15. But in the meantime, based on the telephone conversation and not knowing that Ritchie had already given the Executive order to Gott to pack up to Sollum, Auchinleck had

he also wrote. An initial communication to the reflective question at 11:15: “*even if Gazala evacuated, you keep Acroma, el Adem and the South, while I put together on the frontier reinforcements (...). You are in a position to do so?*”<sup>(130)</sup>. And a second list, dispatch a quarter of an hour later:

“1. If in your judgment the situation has worsened to the point that it cannot even leave the 1st South and 50th Division on the main position of Gazala without definitely run the risk of being cut off and remain isolated, then I agree on retreat, although it appears undesirable given the tactical advantage that assures us a bastion.

2. While recognizing that our armored forces were beaten and that now are less quantitatively and qualitatively to those of the enemy, which so far has achieved his success with two divisions armored and a German motorized, helped to a certain extent by a motorized Italian Division, can't really be under such conditions as to conduct large-scale offensive operations for an indefinite period at the rate held so far. I think he suffered heavy losses and we know that he is running out of ammunition. In addition we are certainly superior in aviation.

3. In those circumstances, Tobruk must be kept and you should not allow the opponent to invest it. This means that the 8th army must keep the *Acroma* -el Adem line and the area to the South and resist all attempts of the enemy of breaking through. Having reduced your front with the evacuation of Gazala and tidied your forces, this should be doable and I order you to do so.

4. If you feel that you cannot accept responsibility to defend that position, you have to say”

(131)

Between Auchinleck and Ritchie was creating a psychological climate tangled, in part because of communications and offset in part for not complete clarity of purpose and expression of the 8th Army. Ritchie received this telegram at 16:00, returning from a visit to Gott and Norrie. Now he had given orders for the recovery of 13th Corp and for the defense of Tobruk and el-Adem and seemed absolutely appropriate to modify them, given their complexity. The two viewpoints diverged, in essence, under three aspects. The northern sector of the new location was the first resistance: Auchinleck wanted him here at Acroma, where Ritchie the preferred on the western perimeter of Tobruk. The meaning of the Acroma -el Adem-Bir el Gobi line was the second: for Auchinleck was the new defensive positions and the reorganization of forces (including 13th Corp) should take place on it, while the Commander-in-Chief would have taken care of the influx of new units at the border; to Ritchie, the rearrangement of 13th Corp and reconstitution of armored forces would have been much better made the border more peaceful environment, and where, for the worst case, you could organize a robust

backward defense. The investment of Tobruk was the third: Auchinleck categorically excluded, as it always had done; Ritchie would instead excluded both because influenced by Gott, who believed that fortress could safely hold two months although besieged, both said previously.

Taken, therefore, vision of the telegram of Auchinleck of 11:30, Ritchie first phoned back to Cairo without being able to communicate with the Commander in Chief; then, at 20:00, he sent a message. He was Acroma not evidence of vital importance, once 13th Corp retired, and this was the reason that had induced to prefer the Tobruk perimeter belt; which aimed to challenge to put back in order the 1st Armored Division as soon as possible, but we cannot exclude again bypassed before succeeding in the attempt; the garrison of Tobruk was able to hold out for a couple of months and that if he had to leave the fort, would probably be able to get away with light weapons but losing everything and arriving at the border completely disorganized. Ultimately, he argued, with all his conviction, the line of conduct *“fight resting on Tobruk and prevent investment; However, where this was not avoidable, allow the siege of Tobruk, rather than order the garrison to fight their way in difficult circumstances.”* And, referring to the hard and stark question of Auchinleck, concluded: *“If this is a correct interpretation of your orders, accept responsibility”* <sup>(132)</sup>.

Auchinleck's orders, final and official, he arrived a few hours later, no reply but crossing the telegram of 20:00:

“Objective: destroy enemy forces in Cyrenaica (...).

Modes: deny the enemy [i.e., defend to the bitter end] line Acroma -el

Adem-el Gubi (...). The positions of Tobruk and other strongholds will be used as lynch pins, however this should not allow any part of the 8th Army to be surrounded and besieged in Tobruk (...).

I'm creating for you a strong mobile reserve in the Sollum -Maddalena for a powerful counter-offensive to launch as soon as possible.

In essence:

- a) the line Acroma -el Adem-el Gubi should not be exceeded by the enemy;
- b) our forces should not be invested in Tobruk and your army will continue to be a mobile field army;
- c) enemy forces will be attacked and destroyed as soon as we have gathered enough forces for a counter-offensive” <sup>(133)</sup>.

Meanwhile the General withdrawal plan had been defined in all parts and at all levels Gott had found the absolute



impossibility of drawn up into columns the entire 13<sup>th</sup> Corp on the via Balbia and decided then that at 18:00 that day the 50th Division opened the way through the Italian lines, trying to affect the right of the Italian X Corp and win through to the desert. The 1st South Africa would remain occupied positions until the early hours of the 15<sup>th</sup>, when the British 50<sup>th</sup> had passed the critical period. But the Gen. Pienaar protested because, in this way, the South Africans were supposed to fulfill almost any retrograde movement in broad daylight, on a congested road, and Italians now aware. Finally got to retire himself at night. Indeed, he was prescribed to make Tobruk with the rearguard no later than 07:00 the following morning. Retreat security was entrusted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division, to the remains of the other mobile units and various artillery, had to keep order between Acroma and Eluet et-Tamar, behind a large minefield, to prevent the Axis units landing on the coastal strip. When the 201<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade and 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Brigade had joined the garrison of Tobruk, all efficient tanks were moved to el-Adem, the 4th Armored Brigade. This, in turn, would have withdrawn after the tail of the 1<sup>st</sup> South African had passed the junction of the Axis road.

For the whole day of 14<sup>th</sup> the DAK tried to reach hill 209 (the position named the *Commonwealth Keep* by the English) and then get off on via Balbia, but did not; the troops were from the continuous fighting and lots were not able to overcome the resistance of the heterogeneous units of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, which also fought doggedly, aware of the importance of the stakes. German assaults resumed with greater incisiveness in the early afternoon with slow progress, while elements of 15th *Panzer* failed to bring about a pass of the escarpment, Bir Bu Amaia, a few kilometers east of hill 209. Unfortunately the darkness fell and the exhausted men of the *Afrikakorps* had reached the extreme limit of their forces.

By more than enough elements provided by aerial reconnaissance included the full meaning of the hasty passing of vehicles eastward and Rommel well knew to stop the coastal road as soon as possible. "He sent the most insistent urging *Africakorps*-recalled von Mellenthin-that came down the slope at night and cuts the retreat of the 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa, but his orders were virtually ignored" <sup>(134)</sup>.

Even before the dusk had begun preliminary moves for the night evacuation of Gazala. The 1st Brigade

South Africa abandoned its sector first: was the southernmost of three brigades of Pienaar and had to travel longer. However, leaving its strongholds in the afternoon, put it through the adjoining British 151<sup>st</sup> Brigade which waited at night, hoping that the Italian units do not raise the alarm.

In fact, as has already been said, many clues and the traffic toward Tobruk left Navarini to suppose and Gioda that the English 13<sup>th</sup> Corp trying not to be surrounded in Gazala, though the use of Italian combat patrols was everywhere a strong reaction. At 16:00 the *Panzerarmee* unable to hook the South African and British with fire and Rommel's personal order arrived at 20:15: "*XXI Corps pursue enemy immediately upon sighting withdraw. Interfere with concentrated artillery fire the withdrawal movements, in particular via Balbia*". Navarini now discarded the idea of night action in a big way for the ease with which the defensive system of the 1st Africa could reject it. Established, therefore, the start of the advance for 04:30 hours of the 15<sup>th</sup>. At that time, robust recon force of a company in the Regiment would have gone forward with the support of the Divisional artillery, engaging enemy units still in place. An artillery corps was to continue fire of interdiction and disorder all night.

The X Corps was essentially defensive-oriented to adapt to circumstances in maturation. However, suddenly, at 19:00 the enemy attacked the area of the *Brescia* <sup>(135)</sup>, between I/20<sup>th</sup> infantry and the XXX/9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, after a brief but violent artillery preparation.

Gen. Ramsden, Commander of the British 50<sup>th</sup> Division, had marked his plan into three phases: opening a gap on the line of the Italians by a battalion of each Brigade; big transit through the breaches opened by mentioned battalions; March to the border, turning south of Bir Hakeim, the two brigades processing on parallel columns. For motorize the Division, of course its transport was abandoned. The first act had substantial success, thanks to the surprise, but soon after the *Brescia* ran for cover with items on reserve and in the dark confused fighting, mostly meeting place, throughout the sector. The same command of the Division came upon a squadron of the 6th South African armored car Regiment with a column of British 69th Brigade and the personnel managed to escape capture with difficulty. A little later the British column in question stumbles

in tactical command of X Corps, stationed at Rotonda Ualeb. In the action of the defense units nearby of the Army Corps, captured 60 prisoners and freed an officer and wounded eight soldiers of the *Brescia*. If the bulk of the 50th British Division passed despite suffering several casualties, the rear column (the 9th Durham with other minor units) found each step and dammed, after awhile groping in the darkness, its commander chose to go back and follow the South Africans towards Tobruk. The *Brescia* calculated losses 27 enemy armored vehicles and more than 300 vehicles and 200 prisoners; Italian were 28 dead, 26 injured and 57 unaccounted for.

The withdrawal of the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division was pretty much the story until the end. The 1st Brigade was able to get into Tobruk overcoming without many problems road congestion; the 3rd and the 2nd Brigade found strong fix on the night running Yes to take the path on the Balbia in full daylight with the inevitable and obvious consequences. Especially since the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division that was supposed to protect all the maneuvering, had retired untimely for misinterpretation of time or lack of clarity of orders. Anyway, at 17:00 in the afternoon of the 15<sup>th</sup> they were at their destination.

Until the early hours of 15 June, just started the advance, the XXI Corps was aware of dealing with elements of the rearguard and immediately spurred the divisions. In particular the *Sabratha* was to strike towards the northeast to join with the 15th German Brigade, who couldn't overcome the resistance the via Balbia. On the other hand, the very tired DAK struggled to get in on the action and only 9 artillery of the 15th *Panzer* was able to take sides, on the edge of the escarpment dominating the narrow coastal strip and open fire on the retreating South Africans. An hour before Rommel was present at command of 15th *Panzer* and realizing the failure of his plan, without wasting time in useless recriminations, had ordered Col. Crasemann (interim Commander of the Division since von Vaerst was wounded) of the bottle whatever still possible the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp.

Two other issues require the attention of Rommel: clean the entire area was urging North of Eluet et-Tamar and, possibly, take el-Adem. Gave the first task at the 15th *Panzer* and started North of Bir Lefa the 21st.

While Gen. Gott was to attend to the defense of the Tobruk sector (only on the 16<sup>th</sup> Auchinleck consented to temporary isolation

of the fort), Norrie had received specific directives for the dynamic action to accomplish throughout the area south and East of Tobruk:

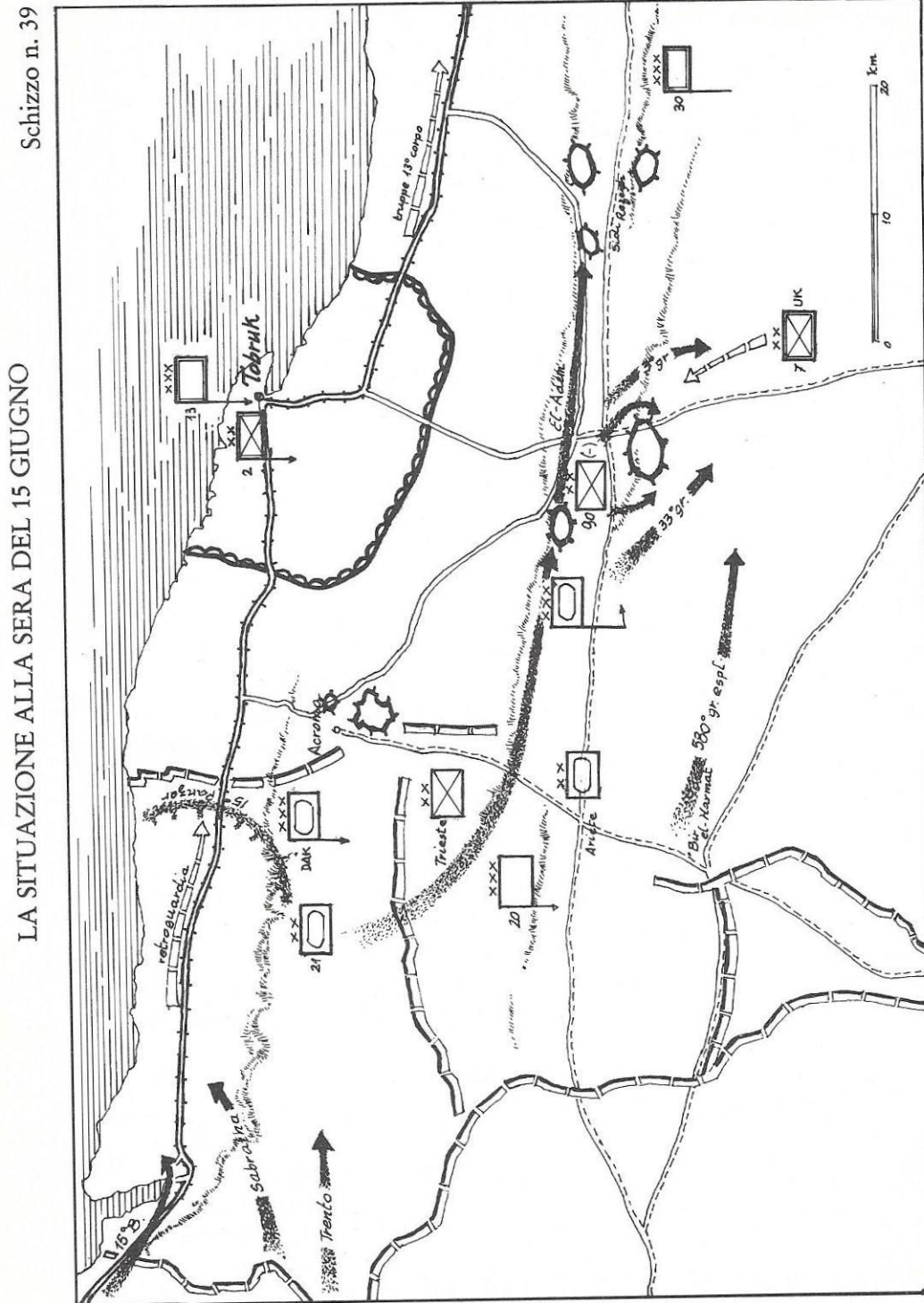
“The greatest current danger- Ritch had written at 20:30 of 14 June-is that the enemy invest Tobruk. The main contribution that the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp would give is to prevent the enemy, along with 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, to close the outputs East of Tobruk. Your task is therefore to inhibit the enemy the ridge of hill 162 up to Belhamed [about the dominant stretch of the Axis road]. To do this, you must prevent the enemy to conduct operations in the area of el Adem-Belhamed-Bir el Gobi, and to keep him as much as possible to the West of this area. I believe that the enemy armored forces should be close to exhaustion and this may give us a few days of respite, during which I will do my best to get stronger in your support.

You do not have any restrictions in the use of armored forces that you can assign. Consider your resources, I think that a tactical approach to mobility attitude will be the best way to reach your goal and a special organization will be put in place to enable all available columns, with their firepower, they could quickly be concentrated in an area potentially threatened. Great sacrifices can be accepted in order to achieve this purpose, from which so much depends on the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps”  
(136)

The mobile column was an idea taken following the example of *Jock Columns* used previously with good achievements, although with operating limitations sensitive. Since the 7th Armored Division could rely on the 7th Armored Brigade (whose three regiments each collected the remains of a brigade and there were altogether 90 tanks), Ritchie did begin with these, but in the following days will try to draw even with the infantry divisions.

El-Adem-controlled, as we know, from el-Hatian stronghold, to hill 163 on the South edge of the crossroads (29th Indian Brigade less one battalion) and Batruna (a battalion)-was the goal for the third time in a week, of the 90th Light. While the 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn carried to the East of the village and the 33rd and 580<sup>th</sup> (pushed from Bir Hakeim with other German divisions) South to repel Mobile columns of the English 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade, at 11:00 about Kleemann invested from the el-Hatian. At this point, Rommel ordered von Bismarck of the 21st *Panzer* along with the Ridge North of the Trigh Capuzzo, eliminate the stronghold of Batruna, reach ed-Duda and continue until Belhamed and ... possibly to Gambut. At 19:30, after three hours of efforts, the 104<sup>th</sup> rifle regiment took 700 prisoners and captured Batruna. In the evening the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* crashed in Sidi Resegh (sketch No. 39). By contrast, the 90th Light was not as successful against the stronghold of el-Hatian.

The situation on the evening of 15 June



The battle of Gazala was won and Rommel took a big sigh of relief. Moving to el-Adem, warned the Comando Superiore that, in order to secure from any surprise, would not have started other actions-that is, the investment of Tobruk-if not a total liquidation of the pocket Acroma -Ain el Gazala and el-Hatian position. For the moment, merely to make bets to Gambut to destroy depots and compel enemy aircraft to move away from that field.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

- 1) DSCSAS, f. 31/42 Segr. date 30.4.1942 of *Panzerarmee Afrika*-Annex No. 12
- 2) In fact, the establishment was prepared of two heavy Auto Groups (each with four Auto units and a mobile workshop), Naples and Bari respectively, no later than 15 June, to be assign to X and XXI Corps.
- 3) Diary Cavallero. Brief visit to North Africa in days 5 and 6 May, 1942.
- 4) DSCS, f. 30760/Op. date 5.5.1942- Annex No. 13. Of these directives Cavallero spoke later to Ciano and especially clarified his thoughts on Malta: *"I know it is a difficult undertaking," said-and that will cost us many casualties and I also know that on this issue I turn away. But I want to, because I consider it essential for the future development of the war. If we take Malta, we have security Libya. If not the situation of the colony will always be precarious. I will personally command the operation. It was also thought at the Principe di Piemonte, but for many reasons he preferred leaving that part aside"* (G. Ciano, op. cited, p. 619). The idea of assuming the direct responsibility of the enterprise makes a pair with advanced to Mussolini on March 5, 1941, in Albania, to set up a third central army, with a Corp of the 11th and one of the 9th Army, and took the lead, while former Chief of the G. S. General and Commander of the armed forces in Albania! (M. MONTANARI, Greece campaign, cit., pp. 672-673).
- 5) DSCSAS, f. 01/8977 op. date 9.5.1942.
- 6) DESMOND YOUNG, Rommel, Longanesi, Milan 1959, p. 167
- 7) Historical Diary of XXI Corps, f. 3638/42 date 8.5.1942 of the *Panzerarmee*.
- 8) Historical Diary of XX Corps, f. 2561/42 Segr. date 23.5.1942 of the *Panzerarmee*.
- 9) DSCSAS, date 22.5.1942.
- 10) F. W. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, pp. 111-112. Von Mellenthin's statement is incorrect, however, because the informational newsletter issued by the Commander of *Panzerarmee* on 25 May at 23:40 warned of the presence of the 22nd Armored Brigade in the area of Bir-el Harmat. Therefore Rommel before decided the *Venice* was aware of this valuable information.
- 11) D. YOUNG, op. cited above, p. 165.
- 12) Summary information attached to the operation order on 20.5.1942 of *Panzerarmee*-Annex No. 14.
- 13) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 134.
- 14) VON MELLENTHIN observed that, contrary to what is stated by Rommel in his war without hate (p. 134), "we knew that the British were receiving the Grant, our evaluation of the 20 may include a full description" (op. cited, p. 111, note 4).
- 15) See order of battle of the axis forces in Libya as of May 24, 1942-Annex No. 15.
- 16) C. AUCHINLECK, Dispatch cit., pp. 390-391, letter to Ritchie on 20.5.1942.
- 17) *Ibid*, p. 368.
- 18) *Brigade Group* expression means a group of non-uniform forces at brigade level. You can consider, in practical terms, corresponding to the reinforced Brigade. Cannot be translated, as often happens to see, in a *group of brigades*, because this condition would indicate a meeting more brigades, i.e. a Division.
- 19) In the offensive led by Gen. O'Connor against the Italian 10<sup>th</sup> Army in at Sidi Barrani, in December 1940, it was the *Brigade Group* consisted of Gen. Selby with forces drawn from the garrison of the entrenched camp of Marsa Matruh.
- 20) Established organic tables on 27.2.1942 provided for the brigades in the Middle East a number of tanks. If the tank regiment was equipped with *Stuart* and *Grant*, it consisted of a squadron command (four *Stuart*), a squadron *Stuart* (a command platoon and four platoons, all on four *Stuart* tanks) and two *Grant* squadrons (a command platoon and three tank platoons; all three *Grant*), for a total of 44 tanks: 20 *Stuart* and 24 *Grant*.

If the regiment was equipped with *Crusader* and *Grant*, it consisted of two *Crusader* squads and one *Grant*, with the same above organics. Therefore, a total of 48 tanks: 36 *Crusader* and twelve *Grant* (H. F. JOSLEN (BASS), *Orders of battle of the Second World War*, H.M.S.O., London 1960)

21 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 514.

22. Ibid -, pp. 514-516.

23 C. BARNETT, op. cited above, p. 208.

24.M. CARVER, op. cited, p. 211.

25 C. AUCHINLECK, *Despatch* cited, pp. 354-355.

26 B.H. LIDDELL HART, *The Tanks*, vol. II, Kassel, London, 1959, p. 155. It would be better for Liddell Hart pointed out that the only competitive axis tanks were the Pzkw III and IV.

27 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 122.

28 each battalion consisted of a company command (with 4 tanks) and three tank companies, with a platoon command (a tank) and three tank platoons (about 5 tanks).

29. Historical Journal *Trieste* Mot. Div., f. 3004/Op. date 26.5.1942.

30. Historical Journal *Ariete* Arm. Div., f. 1271/Op. date 26.5.1942.

31. G. MANCINELLI, op. cited above, p. 89.

32. E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 133.

33. *Kriegstagebuch* of the 21st Panzer. From the same results that the day before the Division had been warned by DAK about the day X, by 14 hours!

34. E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 133.

35. The historical Journal of XX Corps.

36. Actually exploring were three groups, as in the run-up to the 15th *Panzerdivision* had surrendered its 33rd Bn, and all depended on 90th light. As regards the autonomous grouping, the Group Hecker, it had not been joined at Mackenzie.

37. G. MANCINELLI, op. cited above, p. 90.

38. C. BARNETT, op. cited, p. 212.

39. Of the combat on the Rugbet el-Atasc against the Indian 3<sup>rd</sup> Mot. Bd., at that time version was provided which considers the participation of 21st Panzer (The second to Italian-German counteroffensive in North Africa from el Agheila to el Alamein, USSME, London 1951, p. 101). Actually it was a misunderstanding based on unclear summary of events on the historical diary of XX Corps. On the other hand, neither the historical diaries of the *Ariete* and the 13<sup>th</sup> tank nor the 21st Panzer support such representation of the facts. In particular, the latter's *Kriegstagebuch* says: "27.5.42. The Division at 03:15 is in Zone B. Muster at 04:30 to advance northwards. Advancing quickly the Division reaches the Trigh el Abd in the area 6 km southeast of Bir Harmat. 8:30 a.m.: first clash with approximately 80 tanks (type Pilot) in the area of Bir Harmat".

This development is mainly due to the recent study by Francesco Viglione

"Attempt to reconstruct a morning of war of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Tanks Regiment *Ariete*" USSME, military historical studies, Rome 1988. In careful and well-documented work are placed in evidence as well as other aspects of the events of May 27, 1942, including the battle of Bir Hakeim, usually regarded as one with the action at Rugbet el-Atasc.

40. I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 223. According to a German source, around 5 British recon units sent a message that was picked up by the German interception company: "Columns of tanks moving toward us. It almost seems that damned *Afrikakorps* is coming in full" (H.O. BEHRENDT, op. cited, p. 188).

41 J.G. ELLIOTT, *A roll of honor: the story of Indian Army 1939-1945*, Cassel, London 1945, p. 192.

42 W.G. HINGSTON and G.R. STEVENS, *The Tiger Kills: the story of the Indian Divisions in the North African Campaign*, H.M.S.O., London 1944, p. 169.

43. For the episode see. ENRICO SERRA *Carristi dell'Ariete*, trade ed., Roma 1979, cited by F. Viglione.



44. According to one enemy source: "had just passed the first wave of tanks, a second and much heavier was attacked by over two hundred (sic) German and Italian tanks" (G. W. HINGSTON and G.R. STEVENS, op. cited, p. 175).
45. It was Amm Sir Walter Cowan, that spirit of adventure had joined the cavalry with the 18<sup>th</sup> Cavalry as Naval liaison officer. According to one source, two tanks, within walking distance of the demanded surrender, whereupon the Admiral replied: "Dog I won't surrender" and dropped the gun on two means. Then was disarmed and taken away (W. G. HINGSTON and G.R. STEVENS, op. cited). According to a live version: "In reality, the fighting was already finished and the hot old man (he was seventy-two years) was in a hole and stubbornly refused to be prisoner to Sub. Leut. Emiliano D'Anna, who with his unmistakable roman accent continued to summoning him to yield with good-natured: "Daje! Vie fora! ". Was the intervention staff of Maj. Gens. Pinna to unstuck with an imperious gesture of arm accompanied by popping the middle and thumb. Admiral, I pay to surrender to a superior officer, gave to catch his briefcase, was loaded onto an armored car and started in captivity "(F. VIGLIONE, op. cited, p. 91).
46. For a more detailed examination of the combat see. F. VIGLIONE, op. cited above.
47. The testimony of then major in The Adjutant of the battalion (FRANCO BIANCHI, Almost a diary, unpublished, cited by F. Viglione).
48. HENRY LE MIRE, *De Narvik à Kolwesi*, Albin et Michel, Paris, p. 42.
49. PIERRE KOENIG, *Bir Hakeim*, Laffont, Paris 1971, p. 223.
50. Ibid
51. Historical JournalXX Corps Command, date 27.5.1942.
52. C. BARNETT, op. cited above, p. 214.
- 53 Recalling the events of that morning, on Gen. Messervy commented: "*the battle became a real crap. Armored forces not regained equilibrium* "(C. BARNETT, op. cited, p. 215).
54. To describe the State of powerlessness in which had to be discuss the command of *Trieste* few lines are sufficient historical journal on 27 May:  
"The General Commander, who at first light is with the command of the Division, runs to bring South of B. Hakeim in order to find the bulk of the Division in the area of the *Ariete*. For a few hours he remains without news and without links (...). At 10:00 from intercepted radio communications -we learn that the infantry regiments and artillery units are located west of hill 186 of Eluet's Malech and leader of the G.S. Decides to reunite the entire Division in that area. At 14:00 hours the meeting is created (...). At approximately 16:00 General Commander reaches the command post, returning from the *Ariete* and after having contacted the Commander of the Corps. Informed of the location of the units (...) the General Commander sends Major Cabrera attached to the G.S. (...) under the command of XX Corps to make more contacts and get orders in relation to the location that came to take the *Trieste* division.  
You cannot enter or radio link with the command of the Corps and the *Ariete* Division. About midnight, not the Major returning to the camp, sending another officer with a mandate to achieve command of the Corps, but this comes after about three hours warning that the predicted there is no Command in the specified area (...)"
55. Among other things, Baldassarre had communicated to Comando Superiore that the Division was now in area B, which is not exact (historical Diary of XX Corps, tele s.n. date 27.5.1942, 18:20 hours).
- 56 E. ROMMEL, op. cited, p. 136.
57. I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 226. The news of the capture of Messervy and his command was not known by Norrie that on the evening of the 27<sup>th</sup> and not believed by Auchinleck that on the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup>.
- 58 Command historian Diary XXI Corps, fono s.n. date 28.5.1942, at 09:17.
59. I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 225.
- 60 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, pp. 525-526.

- 61 F. W. VON MELLENTIN, op. cited, p. 120.
- 62 *ibid.*, p. 121.
- 63, *ibid.* p. 123.
- 64 A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 124.
65. *ibid.*, p. 124.
66. I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 227.
- 67 The use of Hecker amphibious operation in the East of Gazala fell through, given the trend of events.
68. J.A.I AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, *Crisis in the Desert*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town 1952, p. 32.
- 69 c. BARNETT, op. cited above, p. 219.
- 70 it is worth to make a clarification. In this, as in so many before and after following clashes in the wilderness, it is not easy to describe with accuracy the participating units. In question, according to the official British version the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 22nd Armoured Brigade attacked without success "anti-tank screen" that faced (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited, p. 229). According to Rommel, notoriously disinclined to give the Allied successes, but on this occasion praised the *Ariete*, "in the morning there were only a few British attacks against the *Ariete*, which the Italians repulsed, and weaker attacks on the rest of the front. That day were destroyed 57 enemy tanks" (E. ROMMEL, op. cited, p. 142). According to the official version the 2nd South Africa and 22nd Arm. Bd. "moved against a enemy retreat-and their tanks came under heavy fire and suffered losses," while "a regiment of 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade spent the whole day attacking inconclusively towards Bir el Harmat"- J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 37). According to a witness, the only major action of 30 May was "conducted by 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade that helped (part of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, tried to penetrate the enemy forces deployed in the West and which was supposed to constitute the rearguard of Rommel" (M. CARVER, op. cited, p. 236). Finally, according to another version the attack, launched under the personal guidance of Lumsden, was launched by the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers (2nd Arm. Bd.) against the positions of the *Afrika Korps* on the Bir Aslagh Ridge- on the morning of 30 and in the afternoon with retry the competition of a squadron of 3<sup>rd</sup> County of London Yeomanry (22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd) and the support of about 60 guns. These attacks were against a «anti-tank screen [Rommel] consisting of ninety common including some 88". A regiment of the 4th B.cor. He stayed all day to attack enemy units unspecified [probably the 90th light] in the area of Bir-el Harmat-(B. PITT, *The Crucible of War. Year of Alamein* 1942, Cape, London 1982, p. 58).
- 71 A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 125.
- 72 The history of 150<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., reported by M. CARVER, op. Cited above, p. 239.
- 73 d. YOUNG, op. cited above, p. 168.
- 74 Historical Journal XX Corps, f. 2475/Op. date 2.6.1942.
- 75 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 532. Having captured a copy of the order of operations of Rommel, the command of the 8th Army knew that the conquest of Tobruk had hoped for the day X + 4.
- 76 *ibid.*
- 77 C. AUCHINLECK, letter 3.6.1942, Despatch cit., p. 392.
- 78 *ibid.*, p. 357.
- 79 C. BARNETT, op. cited above, p. 221.
- 80 F. W. VON MELLENTIN, op. cited, p. 126.
- 81, *ibid.* pp. 127-128.
- 82 J.A.I. L.C.F AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, op. cited above, p. 39.
- 83 F.H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, p. 373. It should be noted that until the end of May the information – mostly fragmentary-English figure provided by the service were issued at least one week late. After the beginning of the offensive by Rommel lag was reduced to twenty-four hours.

- 84 M. CARVER, op. cited, p. 246.
- 85 Ibid, p. 244.
- 86 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 536.
- 87 ANTHONY BRETT-JAMES, *Ball of Fire*, p. 184, reported by J.A.I. L.C.F AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, op. cited above, p. 42, note 1.
- 88 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 540.
- 89 M. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 244.
- 90 F. W. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 129.
- 91 *ibid.*, p. 133.
- 92 More precisely it had been established that “*in the case of an action of armored, infantry troops must protect itself. The infantry must not impede the movement of the 22nd Arm. Bd.*” (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited, p. 232).
- 93 J.A.I. L.C.F AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, op. cited above, p. 43-44.
- 94 *ibid.*, p. 46.
- 95 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 547.
- 96 According to the report of Messervy “*due to some misunderstanding in the orders transmitted digit (..) the 2nd Armored Brigade, this read West to East*” (*Ibid*, p. 548)
- 97 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 548.
- 98 *ibid.*, p. 549. Ritchie, however, was not alone in expressing optimism to the bitter end. In the late afternoon, with Gen. Gott sent out the following report: “*the situation June 6 was a favorable day. The enemy has received severe blows throughout the day and the situation in the area of Knightsbridge is greatly improved. According to clues your enemy has failed in the execution of his plan. Many losses in tanks were suffered by the Huns and all troops fought with success and confidence. In every important area the enemy was repulsed and content and in many cases has suffered heavy losses*” J.A.I. L.C.F AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, op. cited above, p. 51).  
Evidently, a comment is superfluous.
- 99 An accusation of negligence towards the few men captured does not seem to be addressed to Axis forces, engaged in a deadly struggle. Moreover, Koenig told Command of 30 Corp: since the presence of 600 Hindu undermines the duty of defending the position, which has limited water resources, if no decision is taken on their compares with sorrow, I will be forced to take them out of the stronghold [and abandon them]” J. MORDAL, op. cited above, p. 102).
- 100 On 3 June the presentation to new negotiator. It was, to be exact, two British soldiers captured by Nazi Germany the day before, which had an order of surrender signed by Rommel. The answer was given to cannon fire.
- On 5 June, took place the third ultimatum: a bright headlights car led to the French lines a German officer who asked to confer with the Commander of stronghold. Koenig, informed, refused to see him and give him five minutes to depart. The officer, however, read aloud the notice of surrender and departed in the car. Even do it on purpose, after few meters the car exploded on a mine and the negotiator returned on foot (JEAN-NOWL VINCENT, *Les Forces Francaises dans la lutte contre l'Axe en Afrique*, Vincennes 1983, p. 153 e segg.).
- It was commented by the BBC with some color and on 8 June Koenig sent the following message to Gen. de Larminat: “The French emission of Radio London it allows ridiculous responses to report on my part to three summons of surrender of the enemy. I answered the first firmly but courteously. I'm a soldier, not a fool. I request that the defense of Bir Hakeim is not fictionalized” j. MORDAL, op. cited above, p. 160).
- For Italy, Mussolini, aware of the request for surrender made by Hassoun, made to communicate their disapproval by Cavallero (DSCS, tele 31099/Op. date 7.6.1942).
- 101 E. ROMMEL, op. cited., p. 150. Rommel's refusal to employ tanks against Bir Hakeim, Ritchie was aware of this by the June 9 by a Ultra decryption.
102. J.N. VINCENT, op. cited above, p. 183.

103. The Hecker group, by the name of master of *Panzerarmee* engineers, had continually changed composition in relation to subsequent tasks. At the time it was formed by II/27<sup>th</sup> infantry of the *Pavia*, by the *San Marco* battalion, two 75/27 batteries of artillery of the 26th of *Pavia* and by some German units.
- 104 J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 51.
- 105 *Ibid*, p. 55.
- 106 *Ibid*.
- 107 DSCS, tele 31045 /Op. date 2.6.1942, at 17:25.
- 108 DSCS, tele 31054 /Op. date 3.6.1942. Tele 1/30 Serv. date 1.6.1942 of the Comando Superiore lamented the worsening situation of the vehicles, also to the influx of vehicles under the program. Tele 31051/Op. date 2.6.1942 of the Comando Supremo stated that in May were landed in Libya 1,700 German and 1,466 Italian vehicles and that the programs issue were "indicative" and "certainly exuberant to predict possibility of transport". Bastico replies that 1,460 vehicles (against 1,906 planned, of which 456 remainder of April), taken off cars, special vehicles, tractors, tanks, and other military, is reduced to 572 trucks, between lightweight and heavyweight: little, therefore, for the ordinary and extraordinary logistical needs on the slopes of the desert.
- 109 Weekly Time, no. 49, date 2.12.1958: "*Mar. Bastico responds to Montgomery*", p. 15.
- 110 Criticism of Gen. Magli built for the Comando Supremo historic diary on 6.6.1942.
- 111 DSCS, tele 31090 /Op. date 6.6.1942- Annex No. 16.
- 112 DSCSAS, tele 10990/Op. date 8.6.1942, at 04:20.
- 113 For the Duce in date 9.6.1942- Annex No. 17.
- 114 The Comando Superiore had sent the command of the army, according to which Italian-German losses at the date of June 7 bypassed on 60% of the tanks (a third of which can be recovered in a few days), 10% of the artillery (reduced with the use of captured guns), 40% of anti-tank guns and 40% of staff. Bastico had commented to find them exaggerated and, at the same time, noted Italian on the same date: 3,000 men, 125 trailer, 44 armored cars, 450 trucks, 39 artillery pieces and 74 cannon from 47/32. In contrast, total enemy losses, according to the *Panzerarmee* went to more than 10,000 prisoners, 640 tanks, 180 artillery pieces, 120 anti-tank guns and 2,000 vehicles between captured and destroyed.
- The observation of Cavallero, Kesselring confirmed that German losses were 2,500 men in total, anti-tank pieces lost could be replaced by those of the war booty and that no concern exists for the field artillery. About Bir Hakeim said If Bir Hakeim still exists, it must be the fact that it is defended by Free French and Italian and German Communists which cannot hope for salvation in the resistance "(from the minutes of the meeting).
- 115 Diary Cavallero, the minutes of the meeting.
- 116 DSCS, tele 31139/Op. date 10.6.1942, 21:00 hours -Appendix No. 18.
- 117 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 552.
- 118 the 8th Army had received the 3rd Indian motor Brigade, the 10th Indian Division, the 1st Armored Brigade and minor units.
- 119 F.H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, pp. 381-382.
- 120 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, pp. 557-559.
- 121 *Ibid*, p. 560.
- 122 F.W. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 135.
- 123 W. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 652.
- 124 F.H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, p. 382.
- 125 Usually present evidences of a combat are researched and cited in support of the real truth of the fact of arms. Where are the protagonists, the thing is acceptable and worthwhile, regardless of Defense of self-interest, after all easy to find. In other cases, however, the level of observation is so limited and information collected so hot unsafe to provide a different picture of reality. Purely as an example, A. Moorehead in his interesting but *The desert war*, describes a general attack on the German-Italian 27 or 28 May against the stronghold of Knightsbridge and relentlessly rejected by guards that

held at the Vortex "as a rock in the sea" (p. 181), and later still a fierce struggle for days and days (p. 188), while in fact the cornerstone was never invested directly, as evidenced also by Playfair and as stated explicitly by Carver (op. cited, p. 275).

126 C. AUCHINLECK, Dispatch, p. 359. According to Playfair and Liddell Hart the *cruisers* remaining efficient amounted to 50.

127 W. CONNELL, op. cited above, pp. 562-563.

128 J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 73.

129 *ibid*, pp. 73-74.

130 W. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 566.

131 *ibid*, pp. 566-567.

132 *ibid*, p. 568.

133 *Ibid*.

134 F.W. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 136.

135 The *Brescia* Inf. Div. was reinforced by 27<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment Command with I/27<sup>th</sup>, by 9° Bersaglieri and Sappers company.

136. I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 248.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE SIEGE OF TOBRUK

#### 1. THE INVESTMENT OF THE FORT

Before we see how the two opponents consider the situation it is appropriate to mention an important event that occurred in those days in the Mediterranean: the operation called by us “*Mid June 1942*”<sup>(1)</sup>.

Malta lived pitiful days. Probably the month of April was its worst period. The roughly 9,500 sorties of aircraft of Axis with the 6,700 tons of bombs thrown on the shipyards, airports, warehouses and junctions had largely neutralized the island as a base offensive. The availability of aircraft had dropped to lowest levels; the 10th submarine flotilla was undergoing transfer to Alexandria, food stocks were sufficient until July with reduced rations, fuel until August.

On the other hand, Great Britain was idealistic, at least for the moment, think of destroying Sicily's airports, from which departed the deadly offenses, because absolute inability to send an air force to achieve decisive results. And, therefore, understandable that organizing a convoy to Malta presents enormous difficulties and risks. In the spring, examining the draft two contemporary convoys, one departing from Gibraltar and the other from Alexandria, the chiefs of staff ruled out the idea to move anything from Gibraltar: in the present circumstances, expose battleships or carriers with aerial attack run from bases in Sicily and Sardinia became an inconceivable luxury. Conversely, bet everything on a single convoy from Alexandria had more unknowns and the “*providential success of March's convoy, which had been primarily determined by weather conditions*”<sup>(2)</sup> hardly would be repeated. In conclusion, on 26 April, the Chief of staff announced that the next attempt to supply Malta had to be postponed until June, when the favorable developments of the offensive from Auchinleck had been allowed to send a supply convoy from Alexandria, unescorted by battleships, within the limits of acceptable risk. If, then, the situation in the Indian Ocean was calming, Adm. Somerville would bring into the Mediterranean the *Warspite*

and three battleships and then the security problem would fall.

In May, things improved considerably. First of all the German participation in the aerial offensive strike dwindled due to the transfer from Sicily of much of II *Fliegerkorps*: two fighter groups to the Russian front and numerous reinforcements granted to *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* (40 Stuka, 10 Ju. 88, 30 Me 109 and 15 Me. 110). Then, on 9 May, the aircraft carrier *Wasp* (provided by President Roosevelt) and *Eagle* from Gibraltar launched 64 *Spitfire*, which radically changed the conditions of air defense, and Malta's offensive capabilities, and the day of the 18<sup>th</sup> the *Eagle* launched 17 more assuring in this way the local air superiority. In the meantime, on 10 May, the fast Minelayer *Welshman* had managed to off load in Valletta 340 tons of valuable supplies, mostly of ammunition. In addition, between late May and early June, the *Eagle* launched to another 55 *Spitfires* to Malta, while the Germans removed from Sicily three bomber groups, leaving only two Ju. 88 with organic reduced to 50% and a fighter group. It is true that the air force was augmented by Superareo Sicily, so that in June it could field four bomber groups, two dive bombers, one torpedo bombers and four fighters, but their technical efficiency was not equal to that of the Ally nor the enemy.

Of course, all this does not alter the urgent need of the convoy to Malta in June: If this hadn't arrived the island would fall without additional effort on the part of the enemy <sup>(3)</sup>. In relation to these considerations on May 10 Churchill had written to Auchinleck that the deadline for attack in Marmarica was supposed to be "*so as to facilitate the passage of convoy planned for moonless period of June.*"

However, further complicating the situation, Rommel had taken the initiative by dimming the hope to occupy the airports of Western Cyrenaica. The only measure that the command in Chief of the Middle East could do was the organization of a large-scale action against these airports and those of Crete, although the plan did not obtain great results. The S.I.M., in fact, in the night of the 12<sup>th</sup> intercepted and decrypted the news sent from Cairo to Washington: "*in the night from June 12 to 13 units of British saboteurs carried out a simultaneous attack against aircraft of nine axis airports*", and immediately warned the Comando Superiore and the OBS. At Martuba and el-Ftèjah attempts were foiled and largely saboteurs captured or killed; at Barce exploded two small ammunition depots.

The *commandos* in Benghazi were more successful: managed to burn two sheds and destroying four aircraft at Benina and damaging five aircraft at the airport at kilometer 3. On Crete, on the other hand, the Germans were surprised and lost 28 planes, 6 trucks, about 100,000 liters of gasoline and 400 bombs.

The British plan to supply Malta consisted of two operations, *Harpoon* from Gibraltar and *Vigorous* from Alexandria, very similar to the previous ones of the same type.

*Harpoon* was that the convoy WS/19.2, consisting of five merchant ships and a tanker, entered the Mediterranean on June 12. It would have been escorted by principle formation Force W (Adm. A.T. Curteis)-composed of the battleship *Malaya* by the aircraft carriers *Eagle* and *Argus* (altogether 22 fighters), by cruisers *Kenya*, *Liverpool* and *Charybdis* and by eight destroyers, and Force X (Cap. Hardy), constituted by the anti-aircraft cruiser HMS *Cairo* and nine destroyers. There were also four minesweepers and six small minesweepers everyone to stay in Malta, after opening the way for the convoy in mined waters around the island, and four submarines tasked with patrols of observation between Sicily and Sardinia. Force W was to return to Gibraltar once arrived at Tunis; - Force X had the task of protecting the convoy to its destination. Apart, Force Y (an oil tanker and two corvettes), refueling at sea of vessels in need.

In Alexandria, the Mediterranean Fleet for a long time had been in difficulty. On May 11 had suffered severe loss of three destroyers, of four, sent against a convoy already arrived in Benghazi by three days. When the formation was spotted by German reconnaissance reversed the route but the onset of the aircraft of 2<sup>nd</sup> *Luftflotte* from Crete led to the sinking of three destroyers. In the first ten days of June arrived reinforcements: total of 4 cruisers and 10 destroyers. Now there were enough ships to act and Adm. Harwood, who on May 20 had replaced Adm. Cunningham, destined to Washington, passed down the planning for *Vigorous*, intended to bring Malta eleven steamers.

For security reasons, called convoy MW. 11, was divided into three sections. The C section, consisting of four ships and escorted by a cruiser and eight destroyers, departed for Port Said before 11 June, with orders to cross the meridian of Sollum in order to cause premature intervention of the Italian fleet. Then, in the night of the 13<sup>th</sup>, it reversed course to rejoin to sections A and B, respectively from Haifa and departing from Alexandria, 36 hours



later. In total the forces under the command of the Adm. Vian for the protection and security of MW 11 amounted to 8 cruisers (including one anti-aircraft), 26 destroyers, 4 corvettes, 2 minesweepers, 18 submarines, a special transport ship (former battleship of 1911, retained by Admiralty and disguised as an efficient battleship), 2 rescue ships.

At 07:55 of the 12<sup>th</sup> informers of the Gibraltar area alerted Supermarina that the *Malaya*, *Eagle* and *Argus*, no fewer than three cruisers and several destroyers had left Gibraltar on their way to the East. More news were that several other ships from the Atlantic, were passed at night across the Strait, with lights turned off. In Rome it suggested immediately a large supply operation to Malta, especially since in the morning we learned of the release of a supply convoy from Alexandria.

At 13:00, the daily transport meeting held the Supreme Command, Adm. Sansonetti, Vice Chief of staff of the R. Marina, observed that it was probably a passage attempt by the entire Force H and added:

“Another submarine was sent on the spot. The air force, on its own, took and made many provisions. We could also send ships, though we are faced with the fact that these ships, performing the operation, returning to Naples and Messina, would not find any supplies, so the Duce was asked by Admiral Riccardi for orders”<sup>(4)</sup>.

The phrase reflects a reality literally Sansonetti distressing: the shortage of fuel oil had reached unsustainable levels. On 6 June the same Sansonetti had informed that “*to fill the Taranto destroyer he had to empty a battleship*”<sup>(5)</sup>; the 10<sup>th</sup> that “*perhaps we should delay the departure of the ships and the departure of the Roselli convoy because at this time there is no nafta for stocks*” expected from Albania, nafta, but delayed due to the sabotage of bridges in Croatia<sup>(6)</sup>. The 11<sup>th</sup> - Adm. Riccardi said:

“The situation of nafta was represented yesterday by Adm. Sansonetti and it is tragic. This is the only word with which you can really define the situation (...). We have right now about 15,000 tons. fuel oil that are fixed and do not know how long they will remain stable. Each stop you reproduce [= impact] inevitably upon the arrivals and our depots are empty. That may happen in the future, yet we cannot say. What is certain is that we have the full support of the German Navy, which knows perfectly our situation, though his situation is just equal to ours. Obviously only one reason of acute failure prevents the German Navy to come and meet, as it has done so far. All

the actions in the North Sea and into the Atlantic by the German Navy are almost completely stopped. It is a problem of military policy which covers essentially the situation in Albania. It is certainly not a matter that will have a ready solution (...). We are obligated at this time to wait for the arrival of a train in order to be sure to make a torpedo boat (...). In essence we live hand to mouth but not per minute, so we do the program of the 13<sup>th</sup> without knowing what we do afterwards until you unlock the 16 thousand tons.”<sup>(7)</sup>.

And on the same day of the 12<sup>th</sup>, before you even speak of Force H, Sansonetti said that a convoy of two motor-ships transporting troop had been necessary to resort to a stopgap, *"i.e. to take for the destroyers of the escort the naphtha of destroyers they were ready for the convoy which was to start two days later"*<sup>(8)</sup>.

For his part, Gen. Santoro, Vice Chief of staff of the R. Aeronautica, on June 7 was speaking about the difficulties of aerial reconnaissance, especially nocturnal, against submarines with a symptomatic comment:

If you give us the fuel, we can stay all night long in service. The British have petrol and we do not!

The Italian Air Force have each month of 11 thousand tons of gasoline. It would need 20 thousand to do all the service. You quickly calculate the chance that you may have with 11 thousand tons gasoline”<sup>(9)</sup>.

Under these circumstances, it became inevitable to ask Mussolini's decisions and these did not hesitate: the Italian Fleet had to take the sea to address Force H from Gibraltar. *"If the British naval forces are in the Central Mediterranean, - he said - Italian naval forces cannot remain in the ports. Naphtha consumption is therefore justified"*<sup>(10)</sup>.

The first idea was to interdict everywhere the westerly convoy, with submarines, wear away with aviation South of Sardinia and attack him by surprise at dawn on the 15<sup>th</sup> with light units and sharp. To the East, on the other hand, the fleet had to intercept the convoy of Alexandria possibly in the a.m., in order to prevent him from breaking contact taking advantage of the night. However, on the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup>, Kesselring's intervention led to a expected pause: German reconnaissance had spotted, and then attacked in the Eastern basin, steamships for a total of 30,000 tons (it was included in section C of the convoy MW. 11), severely damaging two freighters. It was likely that the British operation Gibraltar was a diversion intended to result in sending naval forces westward. *"This valid Reason- Kesselring said-not to try passing ships in the Tyrrhenian Sea, but for*

*keep them in a position to allow their intervention to the East or to the West”* <sup>(11)</sup>.

Anyway, the 13<sup>th</sup> was left to submarines ambushes and air incursions. It was in the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup> which the Supermarina operated executive order: control of operation *Harpoon* was entrusted to the Adm. Da Zara with the 7<sup>th</sup> Naval Division; operation *Vigorous* to Adm. Jachino with the bulk of the fleet. This is not the case of delving into the examination of the actions because it would go off topic <sup>(12)</sup>, the fact is that the two British convoys, WS/19. Z reached Malta partially destroyed while MW.11 not even to their destination: when Adm. Harwood knew, in Alexandria, that the Italian fleet had taken the sea ended up deciding on the return of Adm. Vian.

Ultimately, the two operations are resolved for Britain in a big disappointment (of 17 merchantmen, two arrived in Malta, sank six and nine were forced to turn back), although the 15,000 tons of supplies landed on the island were able to make a valuable contribution to the resistance. From Italy the success was considered full, despite the price paid: the sinking of the Cruiser *Trento* and put out of action for a couple of months the battleship *Vittorio Veneto*. Altogether, the axis lost one Cruiser, 28 Italian and 15 German planes and suffered damage to a battleship and destroyer. Britain had a cruiser, five destroyers and six merchant ships sunk and twenty lost aircraft; four cruisers, five destroyers, two minesweepers, a Corvette, an old battleship and seven merchant ships more or less severely damaged.

Regardless of the outcome, we must point out that in the Italian naval cooperation was still unsatisfactory in many respects. And also true that the disastrous conclusion of operation *Harpoon*, due essentially to aircraft that decimated the convoy, was greatly facilitated by the 7<sup>th</sup> Naval Division that caused it to slowdown and the scattering of the convoy itself. It is true that giving up the operation *Vigorous* was determined by the presence of the Italian fleet at sea, although the air force raids, especially German, were deadly. *“It can't be noted, however, that the tactical success in contrast to Gibraltar convoy was not adequate to the scale of the forces employed - observed Gen. Santoro - nor so complete as it could have been if some shortcomings were not detected in air and naval use”* <sup>(13)</sup> and *“in the field of Air-Sea cooperation-admitted the Adm. Jachino-has shown us a serious progress. The survey was very low by*

*results and very late in the information; the defense of fighters often absent, always inefficient”* <sup>(14)</sup>.

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As we know, since January, with Directive No. 110, Auchinleck had claimed to be his intention to avoid permanent defense of Tobruk or any other locality to the West of the border <sup>(15)</sup> and this will, reaffirmed in February with the directive no. 111 <sup>(16)</sup>, had lately also renewed the insistence of Ritchie. In London, however, we lived in a different order of ideas: “*we didn't have any doubt that [Tobruk] were to be defended at all costs*” had this to say Churchill <sup>(17)</sup>. This statement has been much debated why the directives of the Commander in Chief of the Middle East were sent copies to the Chief of the Imperial General staff. However, on 13 June, when Auchinleck would highlight the difficulty for Ritchie to find the right moment to withdraw the two divisions from Gazala, delicate choice as it would involve a retrograde movement to the “old frontier” the entire army, Churchill took a cause for alarm. There and then responded by welcoming the decision to fight to the bitter end, but shortly thereafter, on the same day of the 14<sup>th</sup>, asked explanations:

*“On which Ritchie will position the withdrawn troops of Gazala? I assume that in any case we should not think about leaving Tobruk. As long as Tobruk in our hands, it is not possible to any serious enemy advance into Egypt. We have already experienced these events in April 1941. I don't understand what you intend the term “retreat to the old frontier”.*

I am very pleased that transfer the New Zealand Division into the Western desert. Let me know when you can be online and where (...)” <sup>(18)</sup>.

Auchinleck was suddenly in serious embarrassment, well understand the dominant thought in London. Examined at length the question with their direct collaborators. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army was still strong enough to defend Tobruk with a proper garrison, accepting even a brief seclusion, and maneuver with a strong mobile mass South of the fort. At 01:30 of the 15<sup>th</sup>, to close the discussion, with Gen. Dorman-Smith, Vice Chief of staff, asked explicitly whether his intentions could be summarized in two points: that it was not to be considered a new siege of Tobruk and that Rommel should be blocked on the line found here-el Adem-Bir el Gobi. Auchinleck replied in the affirmative and ordered in the morning the same Dorman-Smith to carry to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army a directive to that effect.

In fact the letter to Ritchie was oddly generic. Basically, you just highlight the importance of el-Adem tactics and incited a massive effort in that sector:

“(...) I realize that the troops may be tired and disorganized, but probably the enemy is even more, and in this case considerations *must not* prevent you from concentrating all forces available in the decisive stretch, which second to me is el-Adem. I count on you to ensure that nothing is spared to achieve this purpose (...)” <sup>(19)</sup>.

But, in all likelihood, the operational concept should be discussed aloud. Indeed, Dorman-Smith but Gen. Corbett, Chief of G.S., brought the message. The interview with Ritchie seems to have been rather agitated. Things were not so smooth as it seemed to be in Cairo: the bulk of the South African and the English 50th were now at the border; the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division (or rather what was left of it) was proceeding on Balbia East of Tobruk; a German armored column had tucked between Tobruk and el-Adem reaching to ed-Duda. Then Ritchie, who had not at all concentrated the army, he not showing any intention to give battle at el-Adem.

Meanwhile, in the late morning of June 15, Auchinleck had sent to London a summary of orders:

“I ordered General Ritchie to prevent the enemy crossing the line Acroma -el Adem-el Gobi. This does not mean that it should be kept as a fortified line, but that the enemy should not be allowed to pass to the East of it. The two divisions withdrawn from the Gazala positions will be available in order to achieve that objective. Although I do not want the 8th army to be besieged in Tobruk, I have no intention of giving up on Tobruk.

I have given orders to General Ritchie are:

- a) NOT to give the enemy the Acroma -el Adem-el Gobi line;
- b) NOT allowing his forces to invest Tobruk;
- c) To attack and harass the enemy wherever they present an opportunity.

Meanwhile, I propose to set up a reserve as strong as possible in the zone Sollum - Magdalena in order to launch a counter-offensive as soon as possible. The New Zealand Division, already in motion, should gather all ten or twelve days, but of course the elements headed will be available even sooner if necessary (...)” <sup>(20)</sup>.

Tobruk on the issue there was some darkness and Churchill was not satisfied, noting the absence of a peremptory order to defend the fort. Because he wasn't the type to fly on what was at heart, did not hesitate to force his hand:

*“We are delighted-replied-to receive your insurance about the will to not give in Tobruk. The war Cabinet interprets your telegram in the sense that, if necessary, General Ritchie would leave many troops at Tobruk as it takes to ensure the secure possession of the fort”* <sup>(21)</sup>.

Auchinleck was uncomfortable, also because Corbett, returned to Cairo on the evening of the 15<sup>th</sup>, had reported the unpleasant discussion with the Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, the pure and simple rejection of these to defend to the bitter end the line Acroma -el Adem-Bir el Gobi and the measures taken to ensure the mastery if the fort where isolated. On the other hand, according to Gen. de Guingand, head of information of the command in Chief of the Middle East, Auchinleck was *“very concerned [fearing] that your control does not make even more difficult the task of Ritchie”* and ultimately did not exercise undue interference in the decision-making sphere of the Commander of the 8th Army, and later had to observe: *“Maybe at that time Ritchie held too much”* <sup>(22)</sup>.

So he resigned. Ritchie first wrote: despite having claimed in no uncertain terms that Tobruk should not be invested, realize that it remained isolated for a short time, waiting for the counter-offensive. Therefore he, Ritchie, was *“free to organize the garrison as they believed it to be in the fort organs for service and the quantities of stocks considered necessary for the garrison or facilitate counter-offensive”* <sup>(23)</sup>.

Then, consulted the other two commanders in Chief, responded to Churchill:

*“The war Cabinet's interpretation is correct. General Ritchie is moving to Tobruk what he considers adequate troops to defend it, even if they were temporarily surrounded by the enemy. The bulk of the garrison consists of four brigades with related ammunition, food, fuel and water facilities. Provided for the operations of the 8th Army in the near future is the possession of the fortified zone of el-Adem which link pin, and the use of all available mobile forces to prevent the opponent position to the East of el-Adem and Tobruk. Precise orders about were given to General Ritchie and I am confident that he will be able to accomplish it.*

The situation is totally different from that of last year, because now we are not the enemy fortified positions on the frontier, and our fighters can act in the sky over Tobruk, although the use of landing strips of Gambut there is currently denied.

It seems to me that to invest Tobruk and to cover our troops on border positions, the enemy would need larger forces that, according to our information, then has available. In such circumstances, we should

be able to prevent the area between the border and Tobruk pass under the enemy's control.

I discussed the matter with the Secretary of State and the other commanders in Chief, who agree with the line of conduct shown " <sup>(24)</sup>.

Later, Auchinleck would explain their intentions. *"When decided to hold Tobruk - he wrote - I didn't realize that the army would be unable to disrupt the operations of the enemy against the fort"* and added that the presence of a mobile force to the south of the city limit the defense only to western and southern sections of the perimeter. In addition, he considered available for use on site all three infantry divisions: 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> South African and English 50<sup>th</sup> <sup>(25)</sup>. The last word belonged to Churchill. On the eve of his departure for the United States, telegraphed their approval about the meeting of the army's new front closely with reinforcements and stated that *"the Cabinet was very pleased to hear that you intend to hold Tobruk at all costs."* <sup>(26)</sup>

You can't assign wrong to Churchill if operational forecasts seemed sufficiently reassuring. *"Whereas the Auchinleck's plan was to wait until the enemy attack - wrote the Prime Minister - and remembering all the months, it was inconceivable that the fortifications of Tobruk, already beautifully tested, were not kept at the highest degree of efficiency and indeed were not reinforced"* and, of course, a defensive battle, accepted around a bastion and a "misfortune" which guaranteed from the port, could only take place under the best auspices. If then their fate had been against, Tobruk would assume the role of the besieged fortress and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army would retreat to Marsa Matruh, forcing Rommel to stretch his supply line tight and face the thorn in his side of the fort. At this point it is obvious that the influx of powerful reinforcements by sea would not take long to reverse the situation in favor of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. This strategic vision, said Churchill, *"we believed fully shared by the Commander in Chief"* <sup>(27)</sup>.

Meanwhile Ritchie had gone by plane to Tobruk to speak with Gott, who was busily arranging for Gen. Klopper, Commander of the 2nd South African Division to be able to withstand even a short siege. Gott painted the situation very rosy: stated that perimeter defenses were satisfactory, the large and well equipped garrison, abundant stocks, the unnecessary evacuation underway toward the frontier. Klopper, based on the assurance that el-Adem and Belhamed were

firmly held, its guarantee to be able to hold out for three months. In short, the picture was much better than that of the previous year.

Klopper received final orders of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp that same afternoon of 16 June, after Ritchie's visit. Stood out in a very significant sentence, especially considering the large collection of vehicles operated by the Corps, "*In certain circumstances it may be necessary to withdraw the garrison of Tobruk to the border.*" Rightly pointed out the incongruity was the thing, because Gott had just argued that one of the reasons, if not the main, which induced to accept the siege was the impossibility of an orderly retreat.

Apart from that, the order of operations made it clear the concept that, to avoid a lengthy siege, the Garrison would intervene even outside the defensive perimeter. 30<sup>th</sup> Corp would keep the fulcrum of el-Adem, ed Duda, Belhamed and Sidi Resegh; Mobile columns and armored units would have acted in the South of the fort against the flanks and rear of the enemy. If the Axis forces had managed to make their way to beyond Belhamed the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp or the Army would intervened to regain the lost positions or open a line of communication with the fort or retrieve the garrison. Meanwhile, Klopper was to schedule a task to keep open the via Balbia to the East, in cooperation with mobile columns operating further South; a second (operation *Lamphrey*) to regain Belhamed coinciding with an intervention of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp. That Tobruk remained completely surrounded and assaulted in force was not covered <sup>(28)</sup>

Ritchie was extremely influenced by Gott-which, after all, remained firm on the convenience of collecting the 8<sup>th</sup> Army at the border, leaving Tobruk to become besieged-and return quickly to your own command, reported to Auchinleck:

“(...) I have discussed at length with Gott today and I am convinced that we can always accept the investment of Tobruk for short periods with any chance of success, if we make every possible effort to develop a robust forces massed to the South.

Belhamed is the most important point to ensure the defense of the open door. We must base our actions on the possession of el-Adem to cover Belhamed.

Today's reports indicate that around 70% of 50<sup>th</sup> Division is back, but I think the next news will give a better situation. I'm looking for, according to your desire, to reinforce the *box* of el-Adem with



additional artillery, but it was not yet possible because of the local tactical situation (...)”<sup>(29)</sup>.

This message was written on 16 June at 16:30. But there was news.

Since morning, the DAK and the XXI Corps were screened to the East. Some divisions were still engaged in the field of Acroma, but those available were solicited. Rommel was convinced of two things: that Tobruk was defended as in 1941, although surrounded, but with a “*very disorganized*” garrison; the stronghold of el-Hatian, i.e. the *box* of el-Adem, was of great importance in the British defensive plan. But on the evening of the 15<sup>th</sup> interceptions had revealed discussions between British commanders, the withdraw variants and modifications to the alignment, which appeared to focus on the stronghold of el-Hatian as southern defensive accommodation support of Tobruk. “*Even it was necessary to act swiftly*” wrote Rommel<sup>(30)</sup>

The 21st *Panzer*, therefore, occupied ed-Duda and not encountering major difficulties, but then, hit by more raids of *Desert Air Force* and gave up considerable losses due, above all, from the *Hurricane II D* equipped with 40 mm gun, had to stop. He was able to move against the stronghold of Sidi Rezegh, occupied by the I/6<sup>th</sup> *Rajputana Rifles*, only toward 16:00, prior to the establishment of a defensive flank to take away the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade to arrive from Gambut. The fight was interrupted without concrete results at nightfall, but increased in British climax. For the past couple of days the large depots of the Belhamed advanced base were being cleared towards the rear. On 16 June remained about 1 million food rations and about 7 millions gallons of fuel. By order of Ritchie that gasoline was spilled on the sand.

At el-Adem the 90th Light had renewed their attempts against the stronghold of el-Hatian, but still in vain. The request for a reinforcement of tanks made at noon from Gen. Kleeman had not been welcomed by Rommel because the 15th *Panzer* was still far away. On the other hand, at 15:00, the Commander of the army recognized the opportunity to stop the sterile attack, accepting for the moment simply encirclement of the position.

Further South was gracing the *Ariete*, designed to cut the track to Bir el Gobi, which encountered some columns of the 7<sup>th</sup> motorized brigade, the easily dismissed, completing the isolation of the Indian 29th Brigade.

In such circumstances and considering the situation of isolated boxes of the Indian Brigade at Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed, it became apparent to English Commands the real danger of losing a stronghold one after another without the ability to intervene effectively, given the small remaining armored units. Shortly after noon, Norrie and Messervy, hence now depended on the 20th and the 29th Indian Brigade, agreed that to avoid wasting both needlessly had picked up the border brigades.

Informed of this evaluation, and allowed to act by initiative, Ritchie clearly not attributed any importance to el-Adem the which had just shown so sure with Auchinleck and at 17:30 told Norrie who, not being very aware of the progress of the fighting in that sector, he gave permission to decide in relation to local tactical moment. Norrie was not to wait and gave the order that the stronghold of el-Hatian was abandoned that night. At that point the withdrawal maybe it was inevitable, but neither Ritchie nor Norrie, nor Messervy imagined that after the last attempt made by the 90th Light in the afternoon, Rommel had ordered the suspension of efforts. Neither realized that the effect of el-Adem would have had on the defense of Tobruk.

To the West of Tobruk, in the evening the pocket formed between the line of Gazala and the Acroma position was completely cleaned and Navarini and Gioda began to advance towards Tobruk, freeing up first the 15th *Panzer* and the *Trieste*. The movements took place between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>. XXI Corps led to the East of the Axis road -unlock which was essential in order to remove the 15th Brigade *Schützen* (passing to direct command by the army), the army artillery and supplies for the *Afrikakorps*-with the 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri to the north of Balbia, the *Sabratha* between Harf Musa embankment and Balbia and the *Trento* to the south. Moreover the resistance put forward by enemy units still west of Tobruk and the intense artillery fire were more challenging than expected, so the ultimate goal was assigned to the *Trento*, the rocky ridge named by the South Africans *Acroma Keep*, was conquered on the 19<sup>th</sup> morning, after a fight a couple of hours. X Corps, on the other hand, was moved first straddling the Trigh Capuzzo to Bir Lefa, then headed south of Tobruk, with the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri to the west of the roadway for Bir el Gobi, to Bir Batruna; the *Brescia* east, from el-Adem to Bir Bu Assaten; the *Pavia* South of el-Adem.

In the late evening of 16<sup>th</sup> June Ritchie told the command-in-Chief that the attack from 90th Light against el-Hatian had ended in nothing. Didn't say the syllable, however, on which he had granted permission for the evacuation of the stronghold. The disengagement

of 29<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade succeeded, but incompletely. 20:00 since the preparations were perceived by the Germans and became clear around midnight that the garrison was trying to escape to the south and to the northeast for groups of different entities. Now the circle squeezed more, blocking about 500 men at dawn surrendered to Gen. Kleemann, with significant amounts of material.

Moreover, nobody bother to warn Kloppe, who learned of the incident through an armoured car patrol in the afternoon of the 17<sup>th</sup>, and only the following day did he receive news of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. As if that weren't enough, even the I/6<sup>th</sup> Rajputana Rifles abandoned Sidi Rezegh position and gathered with the rest of 20<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade at Belhamed.

The fall of el-Hatian had substantial influence on the developments of the fighting. According to Mellenthin, "*since that time the defense of Tobruk ceased to be a serious military operation*"<sup>(31)</sup>. Perhaps the appreciation is too great, however the episode put in crisis the British defensive plan.

Rommel was forming an increasingly precise idea of the situation. On 17 June he summoned to a meeting Baldassarre and Nehring and drew the guidelines of the conquest of Tobruk. In order to be successful on the first attempt and, consequently, it was necessary to make haste and get the surprise. Then, in the early afternoon the armored divisions were intended to range to the East, stopping at Gambut: the 21st *Panzer* on Balbia, the 15th *Panzer* on the Trigh Capuzzo and on the *Ariete* South the Trigh, to isolate Tobruk and give the impression of wanting to repeat the previous year's blockade. The employment of Gambut was also useful airfield for the *Desert Air Force* fighters. Such objectives, would be captured resulting in the Southeast space and freedom of action required for capture of the fort.

According to the initial design of the commander of the army, the *Trieste* would remain in the area of Bir Batruna, leaving the *Brescia* to pass through, in charge of Tobruk short-range envelopment, but X Corps was still far away. Therefore Rommel changed his mind and ordered Baldassarre to steer the *Trieste* beyond Belhamed, until the via Balbia,<sup>(32)</sup>. No action of force: the two cornerstones of Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed (of which still do not know the evacuation) can be simply controlled, pending surrender eventually. The movements were to have begun in the afternoon of the 15<sup>th</sup> to be conducted with great celerity. Only the night before the attack, the divisions would reach the starting bases.

The only uncertainty stemmed from the presence of the 4th Armored Brigade, which is considered by the German intelligence service as the “*7th Armored Division*”. Its location at about fifteen kilometers south-east of Sidi Rezegh and its predictable intervention towards the west were reported to Rommel before noon. Because it offered an opportunity to deal a further blow to opposing armor, the availability of the DAK and the *Ariete* were responsible for resolving the issue.

The 4th Armored Brigade was able to put in a line about 60 tanks. Rather than a real unit, it was the remnants of the 7th Armored Division, and then its efficiency at the level of entities and the amalgam was rather poor <sup>(33)</sup>.

Since dawn, while the crews were doing maintenance, Gen. Richards had sent two small columns in aid of the 20th Indian Brigade and now, after much protest, it was going to carry out the order of Messervy to reach a position between Sidi Rezegh and el-Adem to act on the flank of the enemy.

At 15:50 the Regiment at the head of the Brigade, formed from the remains of the 5th and 6th *Royal Tanks*, was proceeding more or less calmly when he was hit simultaneously from the West and Southwest by the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, launched at great speed in “*a terrible slogging match*”, as he expressed a British witness. In the late afternoon came into contention even the 15th *Panzer* and the action had no more history: the 4th Armored Brigade stationed himself completely beaten. The next morning Richards picked up South of Gabr Saleh, the remains of the unit, as well as recovered from tank workshops. Still had 58 tanks in different conditions of efficiency, but doubt reliance <sup>(34)</sup>.

The DAK did not pursue. As per provisions received, while the 15th *Panzer* was brought to Bir Chleta, on the Trigh Capuzzo, 21st *Panzer* headed north to Gambut. The area had been evacuated precipitously by the enemy: in the afternoon the 21st Indian and 2<sup>nd</sup> French Brigade had been called to the frontier and the formations of the *Desert Air Force* transferred to Marsa Matruh. The Germans had only some contrast with elements of the rearguard and captured fifteen aircraft (inefficient), as well as large quantities of precious materials.

To 20<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade happened worse. Under these circumstances, it was ordered to evacuate the cornerstone of Belhamed, but instead of letting it take refuge in Tobruk, as it would have been easy, was directed also to the border. The result was that near Gambut went to run into German roadblocks and “*disappeared from the order of battle of the 8th*

Army “. Also about this nobody cared to inform Klopfer.

On the 18 June at 00:30 commander of the 21st *Panzer* reported the army that the “*Balbia road is reached and cut*”. Rommel could be satisfied: Tobruk was isolated, no British element was left between the fort and the border and the situation of supplies was excellent.

The two Italian divisions, left behind from various causes, had begun to move at 16:30, after which the radio link was stopped, as usually happened, and until dawn of the 18<sup>th</sup> Baldassarre remain without news. However both reached the positions indicated.

Auchinleck was completely unaware of the grave developments, so that at 22:00 of the 17<sup>th</sup>, unaware of the eviction of el-Adem, of Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed nor of the unfortunate fight of the 4th Armored Brigade, renewed the order to Ritchie to keep the Italian-German army West of the line Tobruk el-Adem - Bir el Gobi and counter-attack soon. That day, while all liquefy between Tobruk and the border, Ritchie had discussed with the commanders of the 1st South African Division and 50th British Division, concluding on the convenience of developing nine mobile columns, each with a battery, between 18 and 21 June. When the reports on the day's misadventures, he sent a dispatch to Cairo while being said very puzzled about the possibility of aggressive behavior and ensuring at the same time the possession of the border positions. Auchinleck noticed right away by plane to Sollum, accompanied by Dorman-Smith. Having regard to the progress of the battle, he was determined that Tobruk pass to the immediate command of the 8th Army. The 30th Corp prepared at Matruh a operating group to be able to regain the initiative at the appropriate time; the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, instead, acted in the West of the border with twelve mobile columns (each battalion strength) with 116 guns and 66 tanks <sup>(35)</sup>, to engage the enemy wheeled round the behind of the stronghold.

Everything is based on two assumptions: Rommel's attack against Tobruk, considered likely if the 8th Army had not been able to act quickly with mobile columns; or a continuation of the Italian-German effort towards Sollum -Halfaya. Taking into account this last eventuality, agreed also vacate airfields of Sidi Azeiz, carrying fighters near Sidi Barrani and abandoning the sky of Tobruk (apart from the *Kittyhawk*,

equipped with extra fuel tanks). The interview had to be conducted in an unpleasant atmosphere:

*"I was shocked,"* said Dorman-Smith-for the general inability to appreciate the real seriousness of the situation and the apparent belief that Rommel, achieved great success, yes would now lost time around Tobruk. It seemed to me that the 8<sup>th</sup> Army command had too readily accepted the isolation of Tobruk, just what he said he would prevent”<sup>(36)</sup>.

Auchinleck was also annoyed by the tranquil reassurances of Ritchie who would never allow the investment of the fort, but just that day wrote to Mar. Smuts to give him news of South African troops and expressed as Ritchie: had no intention of giving up on Tobruk, which hoped to remain only temporarily isolated; the 8<sup>th</sup> Army would defend the fort and solid positions of Sollum – Hamza - Maddalen, doing everything to maintain the situation in the area to the West of the border<sup>(37)</sup>.

In Cairo, on the afternoon of the 18<sup>th</sup>, was attained by the *Enigma* that Rommel was preparing to capture Tobruk<sup>(38)</sup>. The three Commanders in Chief regrouped for a careful critical examination of the overall picture that emerged from all the information received until the 19<sup>th</sup>. The results were summarized to the chiefs of staff in London in a dated June 20. In essence, relying on the arrival of the 8th Armored Division (end of June) and the 44th British Division (mid-July), he reiterated the purpose of resuming the offensive as soon as possible, with the specific intent to destroy the enemy. The moment was certainly difficult, but all induced optimism. The morale was still high. the correlation of forces generally satisfactory or acceptable, however *“as regards the German tanks we have a three-to-one superiority of tanks with 2 pounder guns and equality in Grants”*; Tobruk had a proper garrison and supplies of all kinds for three months, then it could count on its strength until the resumption of the initiative. In principle the time worked in favor of the 8th Army, given the better chance of restoring efficiency than the Italian-German Army. In addition *"there is no natural position East of Halfaya which the enemy could successfully defend against superior forces. Therefore, although Tobruk and border positions fall, it is highly unlikely that the enemy to attempt an advanced deep into Egypt, unless our forces are definitely defeated on the battlefield, and that it has not received significant reinforcements”*<sup>(39)</sup>.

## 2. THE VICTORY

The June 18 was the day of big decision. Rommel moved with his tactical Command to el-Hatian, which at the time had the headquarters of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp of Norrie, and prepares for an interview with Bastico and Barbasetti. Unfortunately the meeting could not take place for a mix-up and Rommel, obtained from Kesselring-anxious to eliminate the problem of Tobruk to focus on Malta-maximum assurance of the *Luftwaffe* involvement in his favor, sent out an order to attack.

The plan was straightforward: that day was dedicated to the encirclement of the fort and completely clean the area up and beyond Gambut, the 19<sup>th</sup> detailed surveys (minefields, starting bases, artillery deployments), on the evening of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> on the night of employment the departure. 04:00 of the 20<sup>th</sup> in the device had to be developed and the gates opened. At 05:20, at the time of Sunrise, was expecting a massive intervention of *Stukas* and immediately after the start of the artillery preparation.

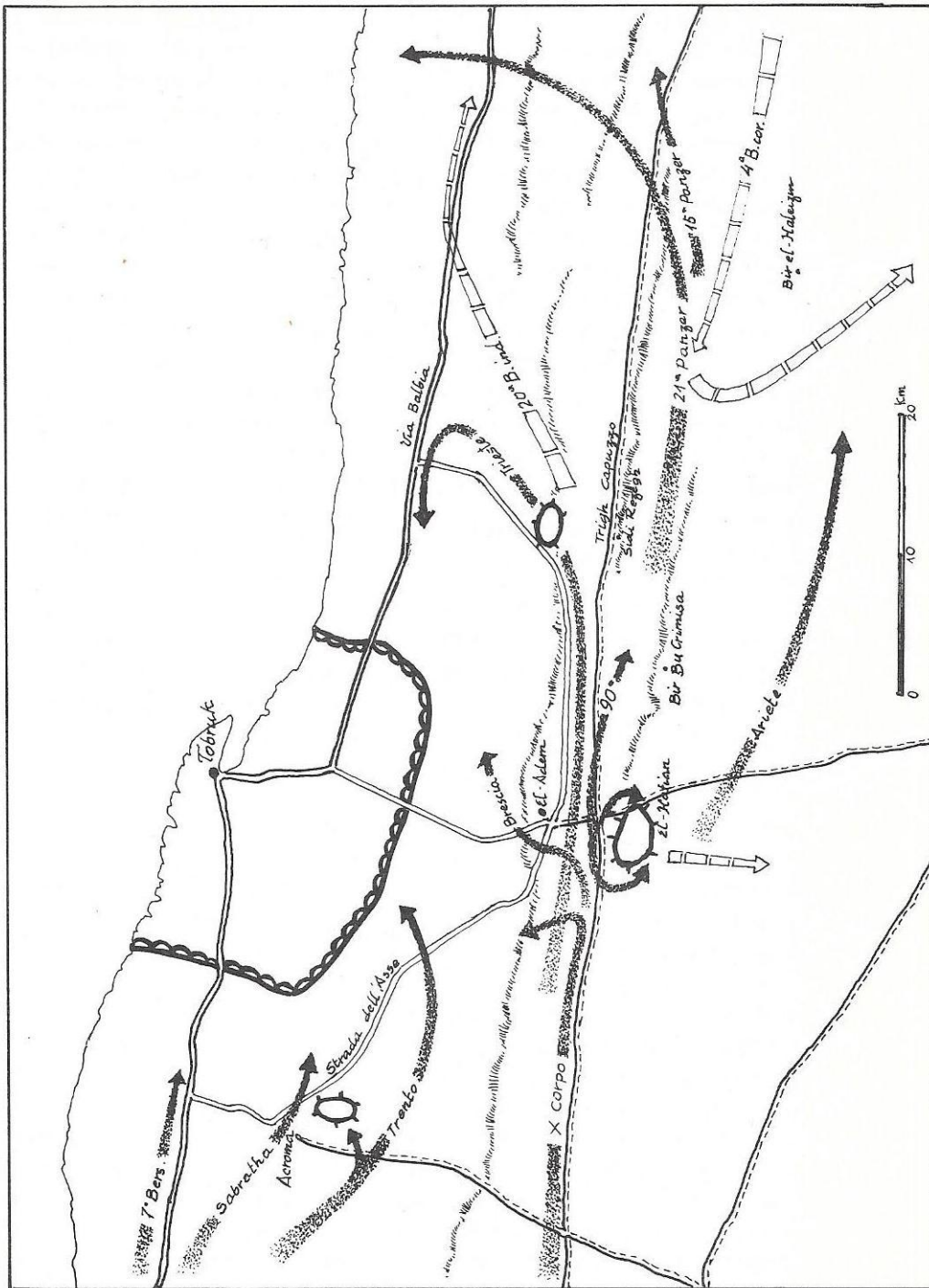
Truth be told, it seems that Nehring has raised any objection to the prospect of take down to work in the dark and at the last moment, but the doubts disappeared pretty quickly, especially when it turned out that the gun emplacements of medium and large caliber prepared for last year's attack were still intact and incredible to say, with the ammunition still massed in their vicinity.

The design for the conquest of Tobruk stemmed from November 1941. It involved breaking the defensive perimeter between the via Balbia and the road to el-Adem, with DAK right and XX Corps on the left. Meanwhile, the XXI Corps was to simulate an action from the West. The X Corps, leapfrogged over the divisions of Baldassarre and Nehring, would have provided the mopping up of the conquered positions and their works. The protection behind the troops engaged the main effort was entrusted to the 90th Light, deployed from Bir Bu Creimisa to Belhamed, with a reinforced battalion at Gambut. A wider radius, against attacks coming from the South and Southeast, was supposed to operate a security layer formed by 580<sup>th</sup> Recon Bn, located halfway between el-Adem and Bir el Gobi; the recon of XX Corps, consisting of the *Nizza* armored car Bn and a battery of 75 mm. self propelled, about ten kilometers further East; and the Ewert group, composed of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Battalions at Bir el-Haleizin. The Trigh Capuzzo, South-West of Gambut, the *Littorio* Arm. Div. would be shifted, if in time (sketch No. 40).

The Envelopment of Tobruk

L'AVVOLGIMENTO DI TOBRUK

Schizzo n. 40





The *Littorio* (Gen. G. Bitossi), indeed, was only a division by name. Had begun transferring in Libya in early December 1941, but once landed, was dismembered, while still undergoing amalgamation and acclimatization. For the needs of the XX Corps, had had to give in many units<sup>(40)</sup>, so, when it was decided his armored army assignment was reduced to tactical level. On 2 June the Comando Supremo had authorized its move from Tripolitania and Cyrenaica on the 17<sup>th</sup> it had arrived West of Tobruk, but still holding the Comando Superiore. On June 19 came into line with 12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiment, the LI Tank battalion (with 36 M 13 tanks) and a battery of 75/27. No element of engineers, nor services. Part of the Division was still ongoing navigation near Homs (XII Tank battalion and an artillery group); the rest, especially units that were to replace those transferred to the *Trieste* and *Ariete*, were still in Italy.

Whatever its real efficiency, the *Littorio* was for Rommel a valuable pawn for more and, knowing now well Barbasetti the way of thinking the Commander of the army, preoccupied with themselves to be represented by Mancinelli which could not be used as an armored group of safe use<sup>(41)</sup>.

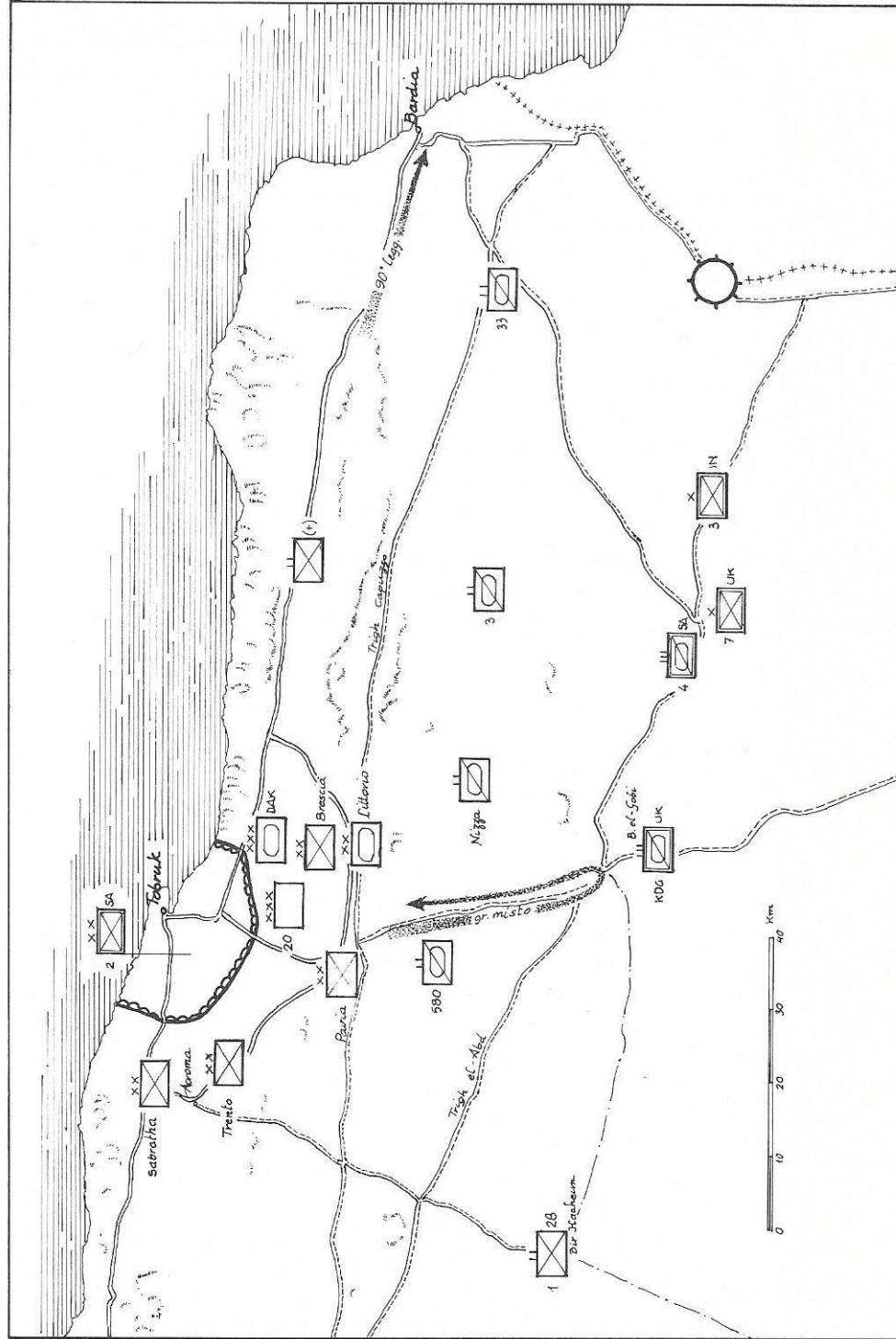
During June 19 the deployment came to take precise contours (sketch No. 41). The XXI Corps struck with the *Sabratha* against the Western front of the fort and occupied with the *Trento* on the bump of er-Russ, fronting Ras el-Medauar, the most important defense position, already the subject of bitter fighting during the previous year and now to reserve with a demo operation. The X Corps improved the accommodation of *Pavia*, confirming its appointment to firmly hold the line of the escarpment from Bir Batruna and Bir el-Adem and el-Hatian, to give security against any attempts of disturbance from the South. The *Brescia* instead spread from Bir el-Adem to Bir Bu Assaten, placing all battalions in the first Echelon and the Divisional artillery close to them, so as to be able to launch immediate follow-up to XX Corps, once penetrated, to occupy to defensive positions exceeded. The XX Corps picked up the *Trieste* northeast of el-Adem, on the rear of the left wing of the *Brescia*, and the *Ariete* at the cross-roads of el Adem. Rommel was to advise Baldassarre that the *Littorio* had arrived and that the following day would work to his orders.

As for the safety device, took over change: Bir el Gobi-early in the morning was abandoned by the enemy, which had caused some annoyance (it was the 1<sup>st</sup> King's *Dragoon Guards*), but

The German-Italian Positions on 19 June

IL DISPOSITIVO ITALO-TEDESCO IL 19 GIUGNO

Schizzo n. 41



to avoid further concerns-as you know, the 7th Armored Division and three armored regiments were on the Trigh el Abd, willing to act in the direction of Tobruk and Trigh Capuzzo-it was decided to send a mechanized column, composed by elements of the *Ariete* and the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, for an armed reconnaissance. The column reached the city before noon without encountering anything and there remained until the night before returning to base.

But it was the East that stood out news. A patrol of the 33rd Recon Bn. late evening went up to the border and could see that Bardia was free of enemy garrison. This known, Rommel ordered immediately the 90<sup>th</sup> Light (looks like without the 15<sup>th</sup> Schützen Brigade) to occupy it by developing explorations to the Southeast, then to the 33rd Recon Bn. from Sidi Azeiz by sending patrols to the Fort Capuzzo and Sidi Omar, and the *Littorio* to send a reinforced Bersaglieri battalion to Gambut in lieu of a unit of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, taking then with the group in the area of Sidi Rezegh-Bir Bu Creimisa. Then, in the early afternoon urged a meeting with Bastico to el-Hatian. The message of the Comando Superiore arrived just as Kesselring telephoned to talk of returning from a visit to Rommel and ask for an interview. At the request of a German plane to travel to el-Adem, Kesselring depicted the impossibility of travel for that day and the inappropriateness for the following day. Ultimately, Bastico was forced to postpone the event to the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The features of Tobruk were still those used by the Italian defense in 1940-41 and the 6th Australian Division in 1941. However, despite what Churchill appeared to believe, from the start of operation *Crusader* no care was more devoted to their efficiency, because no one had thought to a new siege, given the decision of Auchinleck to prevent a recurrence of such an event and to give greater importance to Gazala. Then the anti-tank ditch on the South side was left incomplete and, most importantly, the removal of mines done in the days to allow the sortie of Gen. Scobie to el-Duda had remained so.

The defensive organization seems that left something to be desired for more than one verse, nor did Gen. Klopper manifest to be the right man in the right place, especially since the defeat of the 4th Armored Brigade at Sidi Rezegh and el-Hatian abandonment and Belhamed-Sidi Rezegh threw in to confusion the plan of Ritchie.

Klopper had the 6<sup>th</sup> South African Brigade (Gen. F. W. Cooper) to seal the provenance from Gazala; the 4<sup>th</sup> South African Brigade (Gen. A.A. Hayton), set up to defend the Western tract of the perimeter; the 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade (Gen. A. Anderson), deployed on the southern front. In reserve, the 201<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade (Gen. Johnson) and the 32nd Tank Brigade (Gen. A.L. Willison) with 54 *Valentine* and *Matilda*, as well as some 20 repaired means<sup>(42)</sup>.

In fact, there were the 250 artillery field guns, which supported the 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> South African artillery (each on three batteries) in support of South Africa's two brigades. In addition, there were the 67<sup>th</sup> and 68<sup>th</sup> heavy field artillery (each with eight 4.5 inch guns and eight 155 mm howitzers). It was therefore a decent number of guns; Moreover, certain negative damaging factors. The need to provide for the irruption of the axis armored vehicles had led to deploy in advanced position many field pieces, which could be used in a anti-tank role. Similarly, research into advanced deployments had been suggested by the desire to commit the attack to the further distances. These measures were widely understood-and no better then the Italian 1941 defenders can say-but had a price: limitation in the field of intervention of the batteries. In addition, the ammo massed at stations was not sizeable for safety reasons, and this meant an uncertain timing of supplies, and lacked a centralized system of transmissions. Well-known problems and defects, in its time, by Gen. Pitassi Mannella.

Anti-tank guns amounted to 69: 18 of 6 lbs, 43 of 2 pounds and 8 Bofors<sup>(43)</sup>. Were deemed to be adequate, but were lacking training on the 6 lb piece in some units. The anti-aircraft defense relied on the British 4th anti-aircraft Brigade with 18 pieces of 3.7 inches (as many had been sent to the frontier on June 18 by order of the Army Command) and by the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Africa light anti-aircraft Regiment.

As he stroke to independence, there is no doubt that Tobruk was well provided with: 3 million food rations, 7,000 tons of water, about 7 million gallons of fuel, 150 thousand rounds of field artillery and heavy field shells, 140,000 anti-tank.

Klopper had taken command of the fort on June 16 and in the first meeting, held on the same day, was limited to communicate that Tobruk should be defended and that this was the plan of the army. Some suggestions made in privately by Gen. Willison, formerly involved in the siege of 1941, and by Gen. Johnson was

accepted, but in practice dropped it. The second meeting was held on the 18<sup>th</sup>, after visiting and Ritchie's instructions, however, even in this circumstance, Kloppe was limited to confirm the duty already enunciated without issue any address about normative projects. So on 19 June the deployment was linked necessarily to the defensive perimeter and internal line (Blue Line) supported a minefield not very deep. Was not supported by either a centralized fire organization, nor from a generic though dynamic reaction planning. Truth be told, Gen. Johnson, Commander of the Guards, had prepared six different plans to counter-attack, all intent on blocking by flanking the Italian-German penetrations, but the reconnaissance made miserable the sensitive implementation difficulties due to disorderly arrangement of internal fields. Willison explicitly asked to assume command of all forces in reserve - 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Brigade and a 201<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade - and take advantage of their artillery, as had been done the previous year, but Kloppe did not seem to give much value, or urgency, to the proposed request.

On the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> reports of patrols reported the presence of enemy tanks on the East and South-East of Tobruk and a “*considerable thicken of infantry*” between Acroma and el-Adem. It was probably of German 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade, disengaged from the via Balbia, was preparing a mock attack against Ras el-Medauar, before heading to Belhamed.

We must also recognize the difficulties of Kloppe's position. The 19<sup>th</sup> yet he could not objectively know that between the fort and the border were no longer units of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. He had noticed, almost by accident, the fall of the stronghold of el-Hatian; could guess something to the cornerstones of the Sidi Rezegh and Belhamed; had recovered, just that morning, the small garrison of Acroma, but nothing more. Furthermore, in those hours, the command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was seized by doubt that the cornerstone of Batruna-conquered, as we know, by the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* on 15 June the - resisted again and ordered him to do something to help the defenders. Aside from the momentary doubts aroused by the message, the situation South of Tobruk, was sufficiently clear and it was not followed <sup>(44)</sup>. Let's say that the direction of the predictably imminent battle didn't seem to be put into steady hands. The American military observer in Tobruk had to comment “(...) *that afternoon [of 18 June] after visiting staff offices, I received the impression that things are not flow so smooth as proposed by the Commander of the Division and his*

*Chief of the G.S. Result was a clear lack of discipline of intelligence between Commander and Chief of the G.S. from one side and the heads of the various staff offices, Operations and information, especially from other”* <sup>(45)</sup>. In fact, the staff of the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Africa was quite heterogeneous and, at least for half, consisting of officers with no general and specific experience.

At this point it is interesting to a quick comparison of the defense establishment of Klopper (sketch No. 42) and of Pitassi Mannella in January 1941 (sketch No. 43). The first had about 35,000 men, a couple of hundred (presumably) guns of various caliber, without calculating the war booty, and 54 efficient tanks from 17 tons. (*Valentine*) and 24 tons. (*Matilda*). Had deployed on defensive walls ten battalions or equivalent units and held three infantry battalions in reserve and two tank battalions <sup>(46)</sup>. The second had 24,000 men, 340 artillery pieces of various size (including sea front naval) and 7 efficient wagons of 11 tons (M11/39). Had put in line ten battalions of infantry and kept in reserve, the equivalent of a mechanized battalion. The perimeter fence was virtually equal. The static defense organization Klopper was lower than that of Morshead and then by Scobie in summer-autumn 1941, but better still than Pitassi Mannella. The advantage of the latter in terms of field artillery was considerably reduced by the smallness of the arcs.

Shortly after midnight the day before, Ritchie wrote to Auchinleck indicating the relative calm of the day. In his opinion, after the conquest of Gambut airport putting the *Desert Air Force* in trouble about the interventions in favor of Tobruk, the enemy would have addressed every attention to the fortress but you can also an attempted diversion against British forces at the border. However, it was necessary to consider lawful the opposite hypothesis too, then the best answer appeared to prepare a robust mechanized group in the desert to threaten the Italian-German southern flank <sup>(47)</sup> and, at the same time, to plan a joint action between 13<sup>th</sup> Corp and garrison of Tobruk to prevent uneven these eventualities. He had discussed with Gott and the next night he sent a Staff Officer to Klopper.

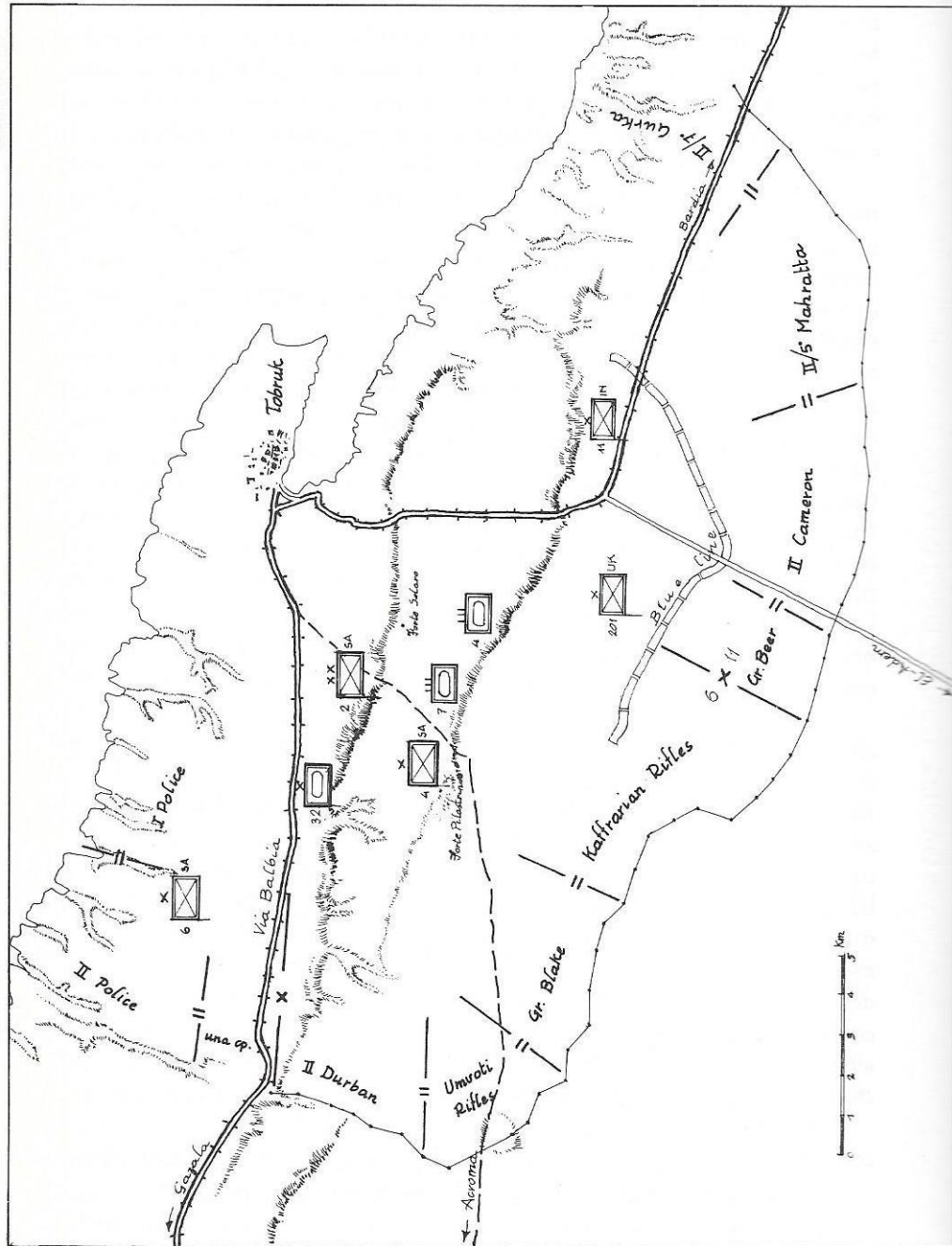
Of course, before had sent a personal message to the Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> South African Division:

“1. In my opinion the enemy he will strike the main attack against Tobruk as soon as conditions permit. Though I cannot discard the possibility that a major effort is directed against the border positions.

The defensive organization of Tobruk in June 1942

L'ORGANIZZAZIONE DIFENSIVA DI TOBRUK  
NEL GIUGNO 1942

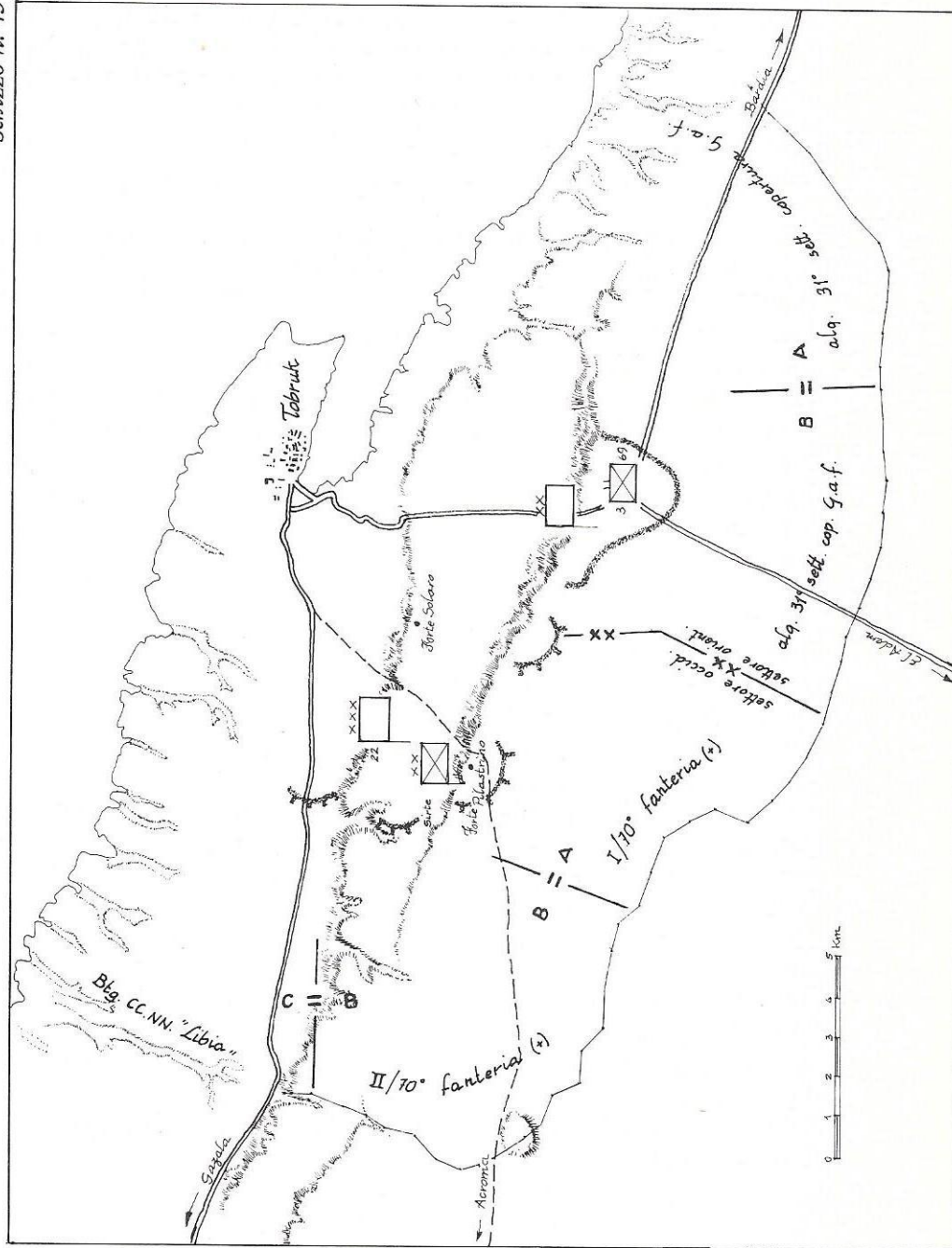
Schizzo n. 42



The defensive organization of Tobruk in January 1941

L'ORGANIZZAZIONE DIFENSIVA DI TOBRUK  
NEL GIUGNO 1941

Schizzo n. 43





2. I am ready to take risks at the border using the columns formed by 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. and the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa Div. together with the forces that act against the southern flank the enemy near el-Adem.

This group takes the name of *Striking Force*.

3. The *Striking Force* will include twelve columns, 116 cannons and 66 tanks.

4. If the enemy attacks the boundary: (a) the garrison of Tobruk (...) will have the task of carrying out a sortie South of Ras el-Medauar to B. 650 no later than; (b) the *Striking Force* (...) will have the task of taking Amoryn Ridge [= probably Hagiag er-Raml, the long escarpment of Batruna, Northwest of el-Adem] from West to East with a diversionary move towards the Sidi Rezegh -Belhamed area.

5. (a) if the enemy attacks Tobruk, the fortress will be held and the enemy penetrations destroyed. (b) if the enemy attacks Tobruk from the Southeast and Southwest, the *Striking Force* the make an effort to the rear. Mode: taking Amoryn Ridge in conjunction with a strong attack on Belhamed -Sidi Rezegh area. (c) if the enemy attacks Tobruk from the West, the *Striking Force* will split the attacker's mass and destroy the weaker party. Mode: taking Amoryn Ridge and further East in conjunction with a strong attack on Belhamed -Sidi Rezegh area.

6. An officer of the General staff will arrive by sea on the 21<sup>st</sup> overnight to discuss the issue after a conference with the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp" (48).

Argue that a similar order shined for clarity, practicality and adherence to specific circumstances would be really excessive. However, he could claim as mental orientation in the decisive action the following night interview. It meant probability of Rommel's attack for the 20<sup>th</sup> - oddly enough-and at best addressed at a sortie by the Guards and the 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Brigade, evidently on the basis of projects that the command of the 2nd South African Division was supposed to provide. But Kloppe was to wait for the official announcement of the army.

Auchinleck was not at all tranquil. Also because now he had no doubts about the opponent's next move: Tobruk. In the late afternoon of the 19<sup>th</sup> aerial reconnaissance had reported that a motorized column 15 miles deep, enemy to the East, had turned northward and then westward and was moving towards Tobruk, along the via Balbia (49). In addition to the command-in-Chief was received by the news that an agenda, issued that same 19<sup>th</sup>, Kesselring had written: "the fate of Africa depends now on Tobruk, every man must remember this tomorrow and act accordingly." (50)

At 6:30 of the 20<sup>th</sup> Auchinleck, therefore, hastened to urge the army: "*yesterday's enemies movements show the intention to launch soon an assault on Tobruk from the East. You will understand the extreme urgency to oppose by every means in your power and you will act as required*

by the circumstances<sup>(51)</sup>”. Shortly after, saw Ritchie's message, replied immediately:

"I am troubled by the seemingly prudent character of your preparations, although I am aware of the difficulties. Crisis can occur in the space of hours, not days, and you must then use everything you can collect. I am seriously alarmed by the inability to intervene by air in support of Tobruk from their current positions. Do whatever you can to protect the advanced landing strips that allow somehow to give relief to Tobruk”<sup>(52)</sup>.

It was too late.

The night of the 20<sup>th</sup> was spent by Italian-German troops in a transparent excitement: all “*felt*” that was the right time. The route chosen for the breaking of the defensive wall had a width of about 18 km and occupies much of the semicircular range between the road to Bir el Gobi and the via Balbia. Started more or less with the forts R. 49 and ending with R. 71 (sketch No. 44). The eastern part was assigned to the DAK, the Western to the XX Corp.

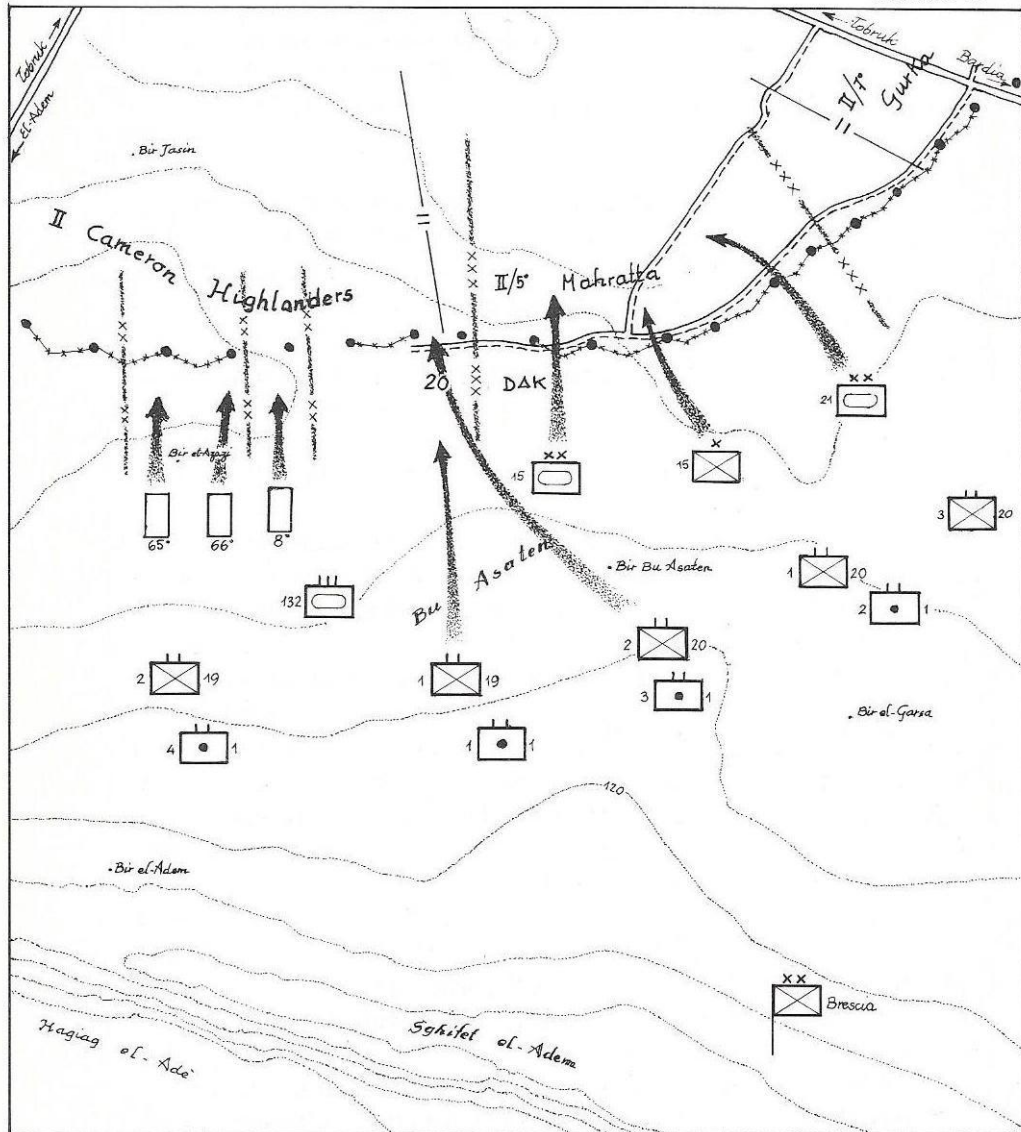
The tasks of the two Corps translated into a mere action of force “to punch straight.” Nehring had to break the line of forts from R 59 to R 71 with the 900<sup>th</sup> pioneer battalion and the 15<sup>th</sup> Rifle Brigade, then continue until the junction of Sidi Mahmud (named by the English *King's Cross*) with the two *Panzerdivisionen*. Received at the junction, the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* Division, left, would have folded to the West to get behind the defenders of Western sector and the 21<sup>st</sup> have liquidated deep resistance and taken possession of the port. Baldassarre was supposed to breakthrough between forts R. 49 and R. 57, including employing two sappers battalions with the first echelon; then would also face West on the rear of the Ras Medauuar positions, engaged frontally by XXI Corps. In essence, the Italian effort focused on a front of about four kilometers. In particular, the *Trieste* was to eliminate forts R. 49 and R.51 (first order) and R. 46 and R. 48 (second order), while the *Ariete* would destroy R. 53 (first order) and R. 50 (second order). On the sides, always within the field of action of XX Corps, was expecting a massive artillery neutralization fire on forts R. 44 and R. 47 on the left and R. 55, R. 57, R. 52 and R. 54 on the right.

X Corps had the responsibility to complete and guarantee the breaking. As soon as Baldassarre and Nehring had penetrated into the fortress, Gioda was to occupy with the *Brescia* the first line of forts, search the forts and temporary organize a defense. Then, continuing the breakthrough, with the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri would reach *King's Cross* by ensuring

Breaking the defences of Tobruk

LA ROTTURA DELLE DIFESE DI TOBRUK

Schizzo n. 44



the possession. The *Pavia* was the defense of the area of el-Adem against any attacks from the South. Fire support provided by the *Arko 104* for the DAK and the Nicolini Art. for XX Corps, for which he directed, at least initially, the Divisional artillery of *Pavia*.

Aviation intervention, considered by Rommel of paramount importance for the realization of the gap at the front of attack and also for rapid mine clearance in minefields, was planned with different objectives. The smoothing of the Southeast sector was reserved for the *Stuka*. The Cant. Z.1007 bis had to bombard the port and artillery deployments to the West of the city, and the CR. 42 the central part of the fortress. Altogether they acted on Tobruk about 150 bombing aircraft of various types and fighters; the first predominantly Germans, the latter mainly in Italian.

As for penetration, Rommel did not believe that the removal of the tanks of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Brigade would have constituted a big problem. Despite not knowing exactly what their number-and did not think it was significant-the DAK could count on 125 tanks and the XX Corps about seventy.

The Organization's haste, and displacements of made at the last minute caused problems that saddled on the ultimate success, but were disruptive. Of course they suffered to a greater extent XX Corps.

The break in the Italian sector was entrusted to three columns, two of *Trieste* (65<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> infantry) and one of the *Ariete* (8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri) similar strengths: a platoon Assault Engineers, half company sappers, two infantry battalions, a tank company, groups of artillery from 75/27 and 100/17 for specific support. The gates, two column, should be opened by sappers, but before the minefields were noticeably softened-and even upset, something disreputable-by the *Stuka*. The Assault Engineers had the burden of cast five assault bridges on the anti-tank ditch. Completed the throwing of bridges and the opening of gates, tanks for each column could precede the infantry to facilitate the attack, opening the way in subsequent barbwire bands. After the first order forts, the second Echelon battalions would leapfrog them.

That night the Army Command had made a first fix: the arrival of bridges appeared problematic, so ought the Assault Engineers and infantry are so mindful of landslide on anti-tank ditch for access ramps.

At 5:20 was programmed the intervention of the *Stuka*, then the artillery preparation (20 minutes), then the infantry attack. Rommel was placed on the escarpment northeast of el-Adem to observe and for gratification, "*the combined power of artillery and bombers was terrifying*" recalled von Mellenthin.

The *Trieste* was still waiting for some units. The sapper company allocated just arrived at 06:30 and II/66<sup>th</sup> infantry, left on Balbia to Bu Amud until late afternoon of the day before waiting for the German side, replacement will arrive at around 10:30. At the appointed hour, therefore, Baldassarre gave away. Although the bombing was extremely brutal, as soon as the sappers approached the minefields the reaction of automatic weapons of defense took immediate and effective. The task of the sappers was anything but simple. It was necessary to operate mine-clearance in the 25 meters deep mined band, crossed by 7 feet wide anti-tank ditch and open a gate 12 meters in depth of trapezoidal barbwire fence. Very slow work, during which the first echelon battalions waited a few hundred meters away. In the sector of the *Trieste* the sappers, who now proceeded to full daylight under the observation and enemy fire, had difficulty do not exceed even with the help of M 13, which advanced to give direct support. The result was that the columns of infantry 65<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> were pinned to the ground, partly because of the opening of fire by British batteries.

On the side of *Ariete* things went a bit better, though in the midst of many difficulties. Given the impossibility of a prior reconnaissance, the sappers company oblique to the right, going to open the first corridor at the interval between forts R. 55 and R. 57 (approximately 08:00 hours), i.e. two kilometers east of fort R. 53, and the second corridor between forts R. 53 and R. 55 (08:30 hours approx.), namely closer but still off the field. In this direction, understandable given the circumstances, it added a lack of coordination and radio or wire connection less acceptable, which is why, if the sappers company commander 08:45 said that the gates were open through the wire, only around 10:30, after a difficult cross movement, the far-right platoon of the XII/8th Bersaglieri showed up at the gap between forts R. 53 and R. 55. The passage of the XII battalion took place around midday and early afternoon passed the V/8th. The way eastwards (open first) was not used.

In the sector of DAK's matter was different and one of the reasons

This difference is to be ascribed, as can be seen, even at the initiative of German officers. Apart from better organization and coordination – infantry – tank – artillery, <sup>(53)</sup> and pioneers Germans found themselves pinned down under crossfire of forts, which prevented them from opening the gates. At 07:30 two officers of 15th *Panzer* stood at the Italian 13<sup>th</sup> battery of 88 mm. deployed with the *Ariete*, asking to “temporary” lending pieces against the enemy works. The battery Commander requested permission to command the IV group of 90/53, who was aggregated, and obtained

“for the march and the aftermath of the two German officers forged ahead eastwards, practically along the whole front attacked by *Ariete*.

We take a position about a mile south of Bir Iunes. The officers that have guided me make me say that we are on the edge of the sector between Italian forces and those of the German 15th *Panzer* Division and indicate their pioneers struggling with a minefield in which have already penetrated, since then stop because hit from behind by some positions that were revealed after being by passed.

A quarter of an hour after two forts were destroyed and occupants of the third had surrendered (...)” <sup>(54)</sup>.

It should be noted that both the 90 group and the 88 battery had participated in the artillery preparation, but nothing had been received for the support in favor of 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, nor probably could play an effective action due to the lack of connection between columns and Command these units. The forts they were supposedly to eliminate were posts R. 58, R. 61 and R. 63.

However, if the 15th *Panzer* the teething troubles had been higher, the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade and the 21st *Panzer* on the right proceeded with unexpected rapidity, thanks also to the State of apparent shock caused by the *Stuka* raids and it showed on the faces of the first Indian prisoners. At 06:35 the riflemen of Col. Menny preparing to attack the Fort R. 69; at 07:00 the 104<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of von Bismarck announced the capture of a Fort; at about 08:00 Crasemann, the interim Commander of 15th *Panzer*, informed that among the works by R. 58 and R. 63 had created enough space for the passage of tanks. Shortly after was the laying of bridges in nearly all areas of II/5<sup>th</sup> *Mahratta* and tanks began to move.

Two counterattacks launched by Gen. Anderson with sector reserves, the carrier platoon of the II/7<sup>th</sup> *Gurka* from the East and a unit of the II/5<sup>th</sup> *Mahratta* from the West, against the 21st *Panzer* proved to be fruitless.

From 07:00 Anderson had informed the fortress command of heavy aerial bombardment on the stretch between fort

R. 61 and R. 65, likely symptom of immediate attack, and of the measures taken, enough to tell him to keep the situation under control. Klopper said he was sending a tank Regiment with an share of infantry to allow a reestablishment of the *status quo*. However, at 08:30, Anderson phoned again to warn of a breach between the R. 58 and R. 63 and hell-bent on unexpectedly overtaken by events, the measures announced were still on the high seas and, what is worse, the orders were neither clear nor complete.

At 09:30 the middle of 11th Indian Brigade was shocked and the local situation jeopardized. Half an hour later the *Mahrattas* resistance had ceased. Klopper received inaccurate news and evidently was not able to form an exact idea of the progress of the fight. Among other things, he seems to have convinced it as a diversionary move by the German side. As a result, the series of mishaps and poor discipline of the intelligences continued. The generals Willison and Johnson, whose units were the only ones available for the dynamic reaction, never met. The first summoned the Commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* and ordered them to counter attack towards the Southeast, so the units showed up at *King's Cross* at 09:30 after a waste of valuable time and without knowing anything about the joint action with the infantry. Proceeding to the via Balbia arrived at *Blue Line* full of uncertainties and under nourished XX Corp and DAK artillery fire. After a brief reflection Commander deployed squadrons hull down at checkpoints on the minefield inside and opposed by refusal to pressure the Indians to proceed further.

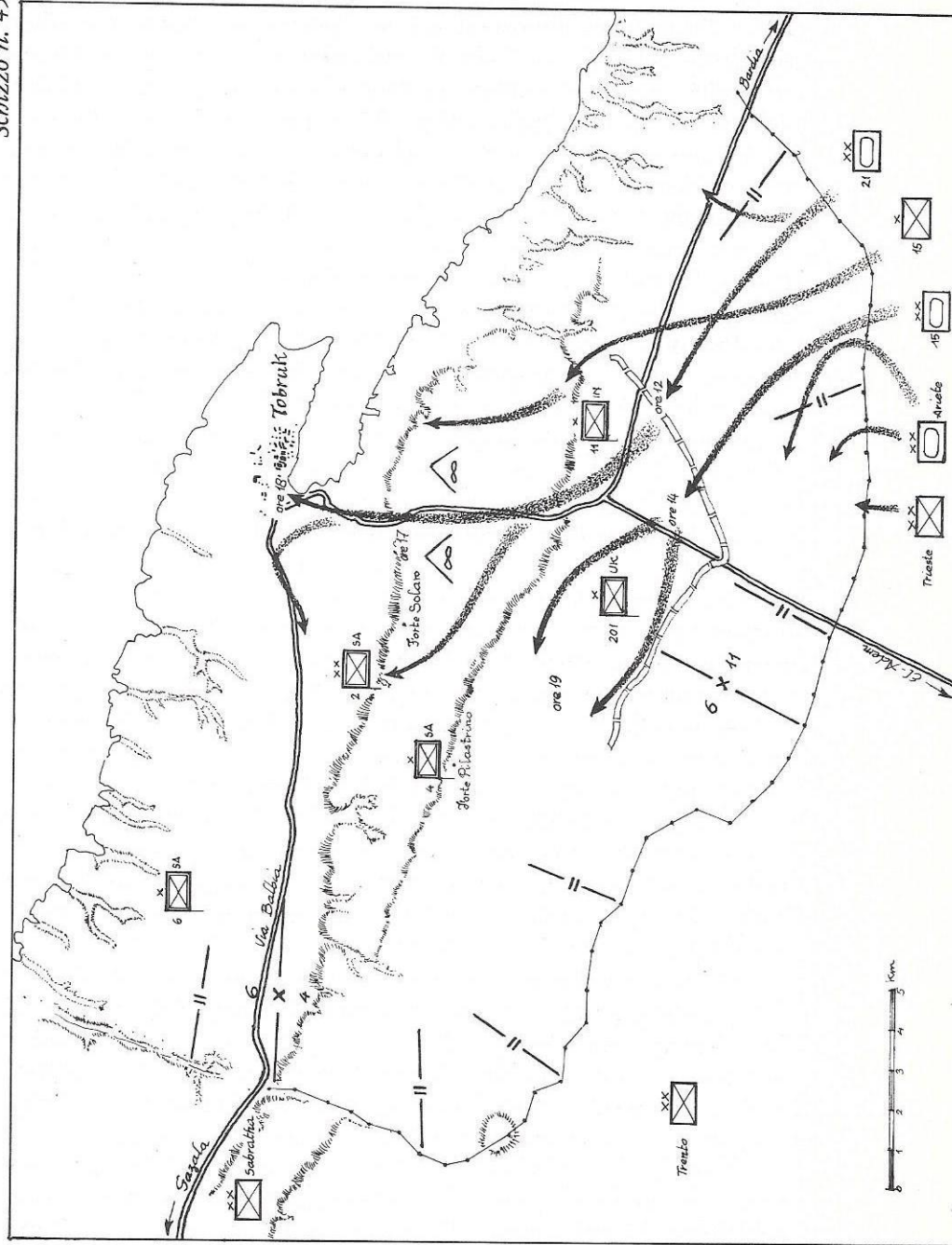
Meanwhile, Willison was ordered the 7<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* to move to *King's Cross*. The Commander of the latter reached the 4<sup>th</sup>, and examined the possibility to block the German advance, acknowledged that the best place was the *Blue Line*, where already were the *Valentine* of the 4<sup>th</sup>, then turned back to the regiment and, passing from command of the 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, reassured him Anderson on the next action of two tank regiments. The result was an overly reassuring communication transmitted at noon under the command of the Division. However, in the end, the two squadrons of 7<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* one was destined to the II *Cameron Highlanders*, who felt the growing pressure of the *Ariete*, and the other to 4<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*.

Already at 10:00 the breach opened in the defenses of the *Mahrattas* had reached the magnitude of five kilometers and, despite the fire side, began the penetration of two *Panzerdivisionen* (sketch No. 45). Around noon and half the 5<sup>th</sup> Armored Regiment attacked the

The conquest of Tobruk (20 June)

LA CONQUISTA DI TOBRUK  
(20 giugno)

Schizzo n. 45





British device on the *Blue Line*: a barrage of 28 artillery pieces spread over a span of more than six kilometers, with a squadron of the 7<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*. The fighting soon manifested learn why the guns of the defense were eliminated from the German guns of the 21 *Panzer* in most range. Added to this is another *Stuka* raid, so before 14:00 British artillery deployment was partially destroyed and 4<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, reduced to six tanks, flowed towards *King's Cross* with a South African battery. It was recalled the squadron sent to the *Cameron*s, but it clashed with the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*. Shortly after 14:00 the fight was over and Rommel reached the junction of Sidi Mahmud, the key point of the defense.

Although not yet very clear the extent of the breakthrough, Kloppe ordered the Guards Brigade to face East to prevent the DAK to come up to the ex- Fort Pilastrino. Over an hour later, when he learned from Anderson, escaped capture by chance, that the command of the 11th Indian was overwhelmed, that the 4<sup>th</sup> South African Brigade to took to its command also the II *Cameron* and the Beer Group and reorganize the Defense somewhat in that area.

The success of the *Afrikakorps* had meanwhile caused Rommel to change part of the initial plan. While the 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri was busy to capture the bypass forts given through, as it turns out, short range, the 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank passed through the breach of the 15th *Panzer* to counteract the defensive side put in place from the II *Cameron* and by other units. Soon after followed the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, to reach the junction of Sidi Mahmud and provide protection to the right of the DAK, in addition, at 14:45 the *Trieste* was ordered transferred to the *Ariete* a column composed of the command of the 65th infantry (Col. Vaiarini), I/65th and I/66th infantry, two groups of the 21<sup>st</sup> artillery. The rest of the Division assumed responsibility of the XX Corps, by being on the defensive.

At the beginning of the attack the *Brescia* remained in second with 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry to the rear of the XX Corp and 20<sup>th</sup> infantry behind the DAK. It had to tighten under the divisions on the front row, sweeping and occupy the conquered forts. Obviously something was not expressed in unequivocally, because the units of the *Brescia* took their movement even before knowing at least if the passes in the minefields were opened. As a result, the II/19<sup>th</sup> Infantry soon found himself behind the immobilized columns of the *Trieste* and the *Ariete*; the I/19<sup>th</sup> Infantry, pointing on the stretch between forts R. 55 and R. 59, of planned by artillery neutralization, stopped it too

at some distance from the enemy positions arrested under a violent fire; the II/20<sup>th</sup> Infantry, which would go towards the forts R. 61 and R. 63 following the 15th *Panzer*, conveyed by the folds of the land oblique to the left and ended right before fort R. 57 and R. 59, little or nothing neutralized. On the right the I and III/20<sup>th</sup> Infantry had no difficulty advancing behind 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade and 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*. Around 13:00, however, the II/20<sup>th</sup> Infantry seized its two forts and joined by the I/19<sup>th</sup>, was widening the gap.

At mid-afternoon the situation fell for the Axis. Consolidated ownership of crossroads of Sidi Mahmud, von Bismarck sailed with the 21st *Panzer* northward and at 17:00, after a brief stop imposed by South African artillery at the former Fort Solaro-break interrupted by the appearance of Rommel in person – went decidedly on Tobruk. On the other hand Col. Crasemann threw himself with great determination on the Guards, routed them in a short time. At 19:00 von Bismarck was able to announce that he had seized the town<sup>(55)</sup> and Craemann have made captives two-thirds of the Guards. The I *Worcester* resisted, which had joined company with the II *Coldstream's* back, at the post. The command of the Division, i.e. of the garrison, it was at that disintegrated around 16:00, first bombed, then semi-overwhelmed by fugitives who sought refuge in a westerly direction. With the appearance of certain *Panzer*, Gen. Klopper, believing that his capture was a matter of minutes, had ordered the destruction of classified documents, ciphers and radio sets, as well as personal loss; However the German tanks, evidently not watchful of prey, diverted. Unfortunately, the relief was only apparent: the splintered Command now was no longer able to work. At 18:30 Klopper took refuge in command of the 6th South African Brigade.

At dusk, the situation was as follows. The 6<sup>th</sup> South African Brigade in was still intact and 4<sup>th</sup> South Africa had little suffered fire and combat patrols action with which the XXI Corps of Navarini had exercised some pressure, though its southern wing (*Kaffrarian Rifles*, Beer group and *Cameron's*) circumvented from the East by 15th *Panzer*, he was preparing to fight all 360°. The II/7<sup>th</sup> *Gurkhas*, quite isolated, still resisted a German tactical group. The remains of the 201<sup>st</sup> Guards Brigade at were their post.

Maybe something could be done, but only to procrastinate the surrender. The upheaval of the broadcasts, the lack of real knowledge of the situation, the loss of almost all

tank, morale sapped by bombing and the breakthrough made impossible an energetic conduct of defense. At 20:00 Kloppe sent to the command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army a significant message: *“My command surrounded. The infantry on the perimeter is still fighting hard. I continue to resist, but I don't know how long”*<sup>(56)</sup>. Ritchie tried to bring help to the fortress, at least to lighten the pressure, inviting Norrie to focus efforts of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division towards Sidi Rezegh, but the move proved to be purely foolish. The telegram arrives at its destination after midnight. At 21:00 the head of the G.S. of the Army Gen. Whiteley, asked Kloppe by a radiotelephone news regarding the progress of the fight and these repeats as written one hour before: *“(…) the situation is not controllable. Counterattack with infantry battalion tonight. All of my tanks are lost. Half of the guns lost. You may want to fight till the last? If you are going to fight back let me know”*. Hearing Ritchie, Whiteley replied that it would have been preferable to make a sortie into the next night. *“Motion Medauuar Director-Knightsbridge - he added - I'll keep open the passage Harmat-el Adem. Informed choice now & route”*<sup>(57)</sup>.

At Tobruk, called to him the main suborders Kloppe, who expressed mixed opinions. At 02:00, then transmitted to the 8th Army decided: *“I am sending out mobile troops this night. Impossible to resist tomorrow. Mobile troops are non-existent. The enemy has captured transport means. We will resist until the last man and the last shot”*<sup>(58)</sup>. However, shortly after the 04:00 of June 21, he changed his mind about an all-out defense, deciding that the benefits to the 8th Army from further resistance was, all in all, negligible and would not have justified the predictable losses. The sudden decision was due to a combination of reasons at about 04:30 Kloppe explained personally to Anderson: according to his information, during the night 150 tanks of 15th *Panzer* congregated in the area of Acroma at the front of the 4th Brigade of South Africa, with the intention of attacking at dawn; the Brigade concerned had ammunition for an hour of fighting; No sortie had possibility to success; the situation was hopeless and the Commander of the army had given him *carte blanche*.<sup>(59)</sup>

At 06:00 Ritchie was able to finally get back in connection with Tobruk and between him and Kloppe took a brief and bitter discussion, whereby he was allowed to take actions as set by the circumstances. At the end of the radio conversation, Kloppe sent officers with white flags to lines of the 15 *Panzer* and *Trento*<sup>(60)</sup>

At 09:30 Rommel met the defeated General at about six kilometers west of Tobruk and accepted the surrender. Immediately on both sides were issued the consequent provisions. It resulted in a certain time and in enemy camp, as often happens in such circumstances, provoked disbelief and protests. The first part of the units almost never engaged to ... what the 6th South African Brigade and the bulk of the 4th. The second by units particularly “in the dark”: the *Gurkhas* and laid down their weapons in the evening and the *Cameron Highlanders* the following morning <sup>(61)</sup>.

The fall of the fortress dearly cost the 8<sup>th</sup> Army: about 33,000 prisoners, 2,000 vehicles and 30 Chariots of restorable efficiency, 5,000 tons of food; considerable quantities of ammunition and other war material. Most of the fuel had been destroyed, but nearly 2,000 tons of petrol fell into the hands of the winners. The picture that was offered to the enemy and that he had found plenty of room in the journalistic reports in January 1941, now looked even richer, the German-Italian.

The agenda of Rommel was proud, proud and ... significant:

“Soldiers!

The great battle of the Marmarica was crowned by the capture of Tobruk. There have been a total of 45,000 prisoners and destroyed or captured almost 1,000 tanks and 400 guns. With your incomparable value and your perseverance you have inflicted on the enemy in the long, tough struggle of the past four weeks blow after blow. Your offensive spirit did lose to the core of his field army, who was ready to pounce on the attack against us, and especially its heavy armored forces. My Special recognition at the controls and the troops for these excellent performances.

Soldiers of the army of Africa!

Now it is completely annihilating the enemy. We will not stop until we have destroyed the last parts of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. In the next few days I will ask you once again to achieve high performance with this our aim.

Rommel”.

The next day he was informed by radio that Hitler had given the baton of a field marshal <sup>(62)</sup>.

### 3. CONSIDERATIONS

Back in quick review important aspects of the battle began on 26 May and ending June 21. Gradually have been formulated comments about decisions made at critical moments, in the light of

News then known. Now, as a result acquired, you can consider each choice.

Was Rommel's plan risky? And the first question that arises, well remembering the concern of the Italian Comando Supremo. Seems needed here, before the race to el Alamein, highlight the deep and absolutely exact Rommel's conviction could never hope to have material superiority over the enemy, unless scattered his forces, as happened twice in the conquest of Cyrenaica. As a result, it was also an acceptable situation inferiority: he would have been able to overcome the disadvantage and to tip the scales from his part thanks to greater skill maneuvering, the certain fundamental superiority of German media (Panzer Mk III type J with 50 gun long-barreled, Mk IV with 75-piece, anti-tank pieces from 50 and 88 and 76 booty of the Soviet war, *Stuka* and Me. 109 fighters), the excellent organization of the *Panzerarmee* and combative capacity of the German troops. In addition, the British Command would help him-thought-failing to concentrate armored forces in the right place and at the right moment.

But this is not sufficient to explain the thought of Rommel. There was a second staple: time worked for the British. Any blow undergone, if you granted breath would always recovered, as long as men, supplies and ships were not their fault, especially with the entry into the field of America and the serious commitment of the *Wehrmacht* in Russia.

All this stemmed from two concepts: the development of a comprehensive tool in its entirety was a luxury, it was necessary to give the best and settle for good; winning wasn't enough, it was necessary to destroy. The caution in those circumstances and that theater was doomed to failure. In essence, the hopes of victory were linked to the ongoing acceptance of calculated risk. Even without wondering what would have happened if the *Panzerarmee* had not attacked on May 26, giving thus to Ritchie that small amount of time needed to be able to throw himself forward, we must also agree on the fortitude of a Corps Commander that it was going to a deadly duel-all battles of Rommel were or could be deadly, as opposed to those of the Britannica Phoenix-with very serious psychological concerns. Suffice it to recall the recommendations of Cavallero: do not induce a deep deterioration of the army, does not impair the Italian divisions, reordering does not get bogged down

in a fatiguing siege of Tobruk, summarize the deployment of Gazala where the conquest of fortress was nuanced.

The plan has already said enough. He wrinkles his nose to Bastico and Barbasetti, provided enough that something went wrong to see arrive the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division reported to the East of Tobruk. Gause was not optimistic and less still Bayerlein, who was considered dangerous to go leaving behind Bir Hakeim. Von Mellenthin later said that, if it had been known that the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade and 32<sup>nd</sup> Tank Brigade close to the line of Gazala, even Rommel would have given up on the offensive. Navarini and Gioda were in trouble already stationary, provided that their infantry, desperately lacking vehicles, suffering from sensitive logistical deficiencies. A comment is succinctly sharp: given mistakes in assessing the consistency and the location of the units of the 8th Army, “*the plan was a surprisingly optimistic and bold*”<sup>(63)</sup>, but judging a chief determinations should be present the information he had.

The unpleasant surprises encountered by Rommel since the beginning of the enveloping maneuver not stemmed from an erroneous assessment of the British side on his part, but from certain gaps in the news on the enemy: size and development of minefields to the South of the Trigh el Abd, location of the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade to the South-East of Bir Hakeim, the cornerstone of the 150<sup>th</sup> British Brigade at Got el-Ualeb the real power of the *Grant* with their cannons from the 75 range greater than that of the *Panzer*. But, for excellent service can be the information, well rarely an army can get a full and accurate picture of the opposite. And, even if it were accurate, there are always doubts about the reliability of the news.

In our case a formidable help came to Rommel of the so-called “*good source*”: interception of communications of American Col. Fellers from Cairo to Rome<sup>(64)</sup>. Moreover, it is good to point out; this paper was broadly balanced by *Ultra*, the machine that decrypted German encrypted texts from the quintessential *Enigma*. In addition there was the normal field interception service, efficient on both sides, but particularly from the German, by the 621<sup>st</sup> company for the Electronics exploration:

“At the beginning of June 1942-recounts an officer of the company - I was assigned, with two radio-telegraph operators, to the tactical command of Rommel. Each message intercepted by the company and considered of some importance had to be sent to me after a few minutes in order to promptly inform the Commander in Chief. According to the news, I updated the map

of the situation and not infrequently happened that the texts were read by Rommel, while opposing radio stations still broadcasting requests for explanations relating to that same message!”<sup>(65)</sup>.

In terms of news on the enemy, therefore, we can conclude that among various kinds of intercepts, aerial reconnaissance activity and terrestrial and prisoner interrogations, Rommel and Ritchie were basically on par: everyone was aware, with sufficient approximation of the situation and the intentions of the other. The shaded areas were to be illuminated by intuition and instinct, by alertness and clarity of intention. All things where Rommel excelled.

The dubious decision, which had provoked the displeasure of Bayerlein, relates to Bir Hakeim. Take it now or leave it behind? The latter solution proved that the cornerstone was to absolutely be eliminated even before they finish the battle, too serious resulting inconveniences that it presented, which support point for the many recon units or motorized battle groups English and South African are responsible for cutting off the bulk of the long line of supplies to the *Panzerarmee* maneuver and spread alarm and confusion in German-Italian backline.

Still, on the other hand, the fact that the conquest of Bir Hakeim was anything but easy, so much so that to solve it incurred a massive aviation intervention and the use of the *Trieste*, of 15th *Panzer* and part of the Corps Artillery. “*Some British officers have insulated-wrote von Mellenthin-that French morale was off, but in the whole course of war in the desert we never met a more heroic and determined defense*”<sup>(66)</sup>. In other words, if the cornerstone was assigned as the prime objective to XX Corps (in *Venice*) or the DAK (in the original version of the plan), does not seem exaggerated to predict a strong wear to the attacking troops, with two dramatic consequences: loss of efficiency of the mass of maneuver and waste of time, the one and the other more than enough to derail the attack.

As regards the adoption of variant *Venice*, you can't argue with confidence that it has benefited to the success of the plan, however, considering the past struggles of the *Trieste*, finished by mistake in the middle to large minefields, it is presumable that the XX Corps, where he was entangled in full, would have suffered a strain sensitive and all flank march would be found in isolated blocks in contact with British armored forces sufficient consistency to create serious difficulties. Then, in the end, maybe the plan would be nuanced since

first day and the Axis mobile divisions would have to try to better the way back under conditions of severe disorganization. .

The most critical moment of the battle probably took place on 29 May, when the death of any hope of quick victory, the depletion of the equipment and the difficulties of supply, together with the massing of British Armored units, they fear the worst. Soon after, between 30 May and 1 June, surfaced the temptation to withdraw, once broke through at the *Trigh*, and give up the continuation of the offensive. Only at the end of the fight into the cauldron success appeared actually at hand. The doubts on the success of the maneuver, which had not spared the main collaborators of Rommel, arose early on in the Comando Superiore and began to dissipate, albeit slightly, on 1 June, after elimination of the cornerstone of Got el-Ualeb, the mass meeting and the opening of a fueling channel through the minefields. On 31 May, in fact, Bastico was to distance themselves, summing up the situation to Cavallero in terms openly critical of his own principle subordinate:

“(…) the surprise that was largely based on Rommel's bold plan has failed, provided that, as I predicted and represented to Rommel, the enemy lingering envelopment movement, attacking armored forces near Bir Hakeim, where our *Ariete* Division and later the *Trieste* Division [?] have brilliantly sustained actions by removing enemy resistance.

Although the surprise failed, Rommel wanted to persist in a maneuver that has now acquired a territorial character and has scattered the attested mass, fractional presented to enemy attacks, hence the withdrawal already known from 90th div. and the weak action of the C. T.A. [= DAK], seconded by XX Corps. Nevertheless on the evening of 29 May, reached the embankment on the Balbia between Acroma and Gazala, behind the Gazala line, where our X and XXI Corps had exerted strong pressure and where they had already manifested signs of abating [?], the situation was certainly beneficial to us and could even justify acts of Audacity behind Gazala with the C.T.A. But Rommel did not try and, after a few hours from order attack on Gazala, he ordered the C.T.A. to retreat South justifying with obvious reason serious need of supplies. This retreat has emboldened the spirit shaken opponent, who then launched attacks almost everywhere (...)”  
(67).

Regardless of the gratuity of this statement, the Comando Superiore's attitude is significant. And to those who do not share the work of subordinate, but does not intervene in the knowledge of having little say in the matter and grounds more damaging that useless a contrast



at such a high level. A difficult position, but could be dealt with more style. Nor should Comando Supremo be free from criticism in this regard. Just scroll through correspondence and Office memos from that time period to see how in Rome you tend to demonstrate more insightful, visionary, comprehensive, incisive; You succinct principles of expression and realistically contradictory or just realistic in a fight based on the armored troops; and yet, having to or wanting to give a concrete follow-up to address the battle ended *"with a this place, decision about the further conduct of the battle is left to this Supercomando, that, the place has more elements to assess according to Rommel the situation and possibilities & our enemy"* <sup>(68)</sup>

But there were also other restless characters. On the evening of 31 May, Commander of the *Panzerarmee* a diplomat of the *Auswärtiges Amt* was very pessimistic about the outcome of the battle and tried with appropriate words, to induce Mancinelli to provoke some action *"from above"* to oblige Rommel to stop the offensive before his *"recklessness"* leads all to full ruin <sup>(69)</sup>. Mancinelli replied to have absolute confidence in the Commander in Chief and dropped the hint, however two days later felt the need to express to the Comando Superiore his own thoughts:

"The figure of Commander to General Rommel remains enormous. Despite the disappointment felt at finding of optimism which were ideologically misguided projects and hopes of A.C.A. [army Africa] and acknowledged the magnitude, very notable opposing forces, he immediately stamped the great features operations with caution.

A well known in action, concludes that as Commander is bold but not reckless. Its decisions, which appear to be impulsive and impromptu, are instead the result, generally, long hours of reflection and often a possibility opened by careful control action, practicing up in detail, to determine precisely the conditions necessary for their implementation.

Examples: on 27 May need to ascertain immediately if Acroma to be open. Follows the action of C.T.A. in the episodes, to hasten their pace of advanced. This reached a sufficiently advanced alignment, launches himself towards Acroma, which is watched by enemy armored forces.

On 28-29 May communications are interrupted by the enemy between the deployment of C.T.A. and the area of Bir-el Harmat, where they stop its supply columns. You must re-enable them. Since the afternoon of the 28<sup>th</sup> General Rommel follows and pushes a step by step the action of the *Ariete*, reconns the minefields, orders the opening of gates. The next morning, given the provisions to fend off an enemy attack along the Trigh Capuzzo, he puts himself in

the head of the columns and, through the aforementioned gates and the *Ariete*, the guides them to their destination.

The 30 May need to re-establish links with the X Corp. General Rommel follows the action of the C.T.A., he recognizes the minefield in which does open a gate, and only then order the flow of supply.

Knowledge of the terrain and wonderful sense of orientation allows him to go anywhere and everywhere present, animator and Director.

Excellent availability and connection media organization allows him to be kept abreast of the situation and issue orders wherever he is.

The weaknesses of his command system are essentially two: to force the possibility of physical endurance of his nature compelled (after eight days the signs of fatigue are evident) and wear down excessively his staff (in eight days lost, injured, Chief of the G.S., the head of the links, the Chief Operations Office. Three other officers, less in evidence, are also more or less severely injured). The army is constantly under the threat of serious crises which would encounter if the Commander failed (...)”<sup>(70)</sup>.

Indeed, the action of Rommel's command was based upon a mobility that, beside advantages, had significant drawbacks. On 3 or 4 June Kesselring went to the hospital to visit the wounded Derna Gause and Westphal and seems to have commented on strictly a commander of that army, pushing more and more advanced lines, lost contact with more than half of the army. And the same Mancinelli, responding to Comando Superiore asking for account of some conflicting data provided above, stated:

“(...) Information from me is sent always drawn without exception from General Rommel both the Chief of the G.S. and the Operations Bureau Chief. Nor is it in my faculty avoid sometimes contradictions arising from the fact that three elements are not normally together certain orders given personally and on the spot are known sometimes delayed or incompletely. (...) At title fix sure findings point out that yesterday I had to search for almost seven hours for General Rommel on the battlefield before he could be reached”<sup>(71)</sup>.

Rommel could not but notice the difficulties arising out of his way to act and, on the other hand, had to be alive in him good memories of the drama three days of late November 1941, during the raid on the frontier, when he was cut off from the battle. If he did, accepting the risk of a partial repeat of the crisis, it is provided that such a need was. The XXI and X Corps were formed by weak infantry divisions, lack of vehicles and therefore can be used simply in a role almost static. To

Rommel, in the end, it was enough that remained where they were. In a tactical environment where only the maneuver could offer victory, those that were in all respects were motorized and armored divisions (and of course, first of all, the German). Following them in person and driving to court reins the DAK and the XX Corps, and the high-caliber artillery, he was able to know the trend of events, to take decisions quickly and send the divisions their orders – always expressed very clearly-with immediacy. The attention reserved to large Italian infantry unit was absolutely negligible in every phase of the battle, except when it was necessary to entrust some of them a particular task, such as the *Brescia* during the attack on Tobruk. The same 15th *Schützen* Brigade had him a much greater consideration, until it was somehow motorized.

Less still worried of lines of communication and the backline, whose responsibility was Italian. The Italian was in Command fix for deficiency of appropriate units to carry out similar task, he was relatively unconcerned. However, for objectivity, we must also say that, particularly in the backline, the farthest they had too many negative episodes checked not justifiable in any way.

It is not without reason that the Comando Superiore intervened on this issue with a very explicit circular. Recognized cavalierly the courage, the ability, the *commando* operations and unscrupulousness of patrols of *Rangers*, the letter continued:

“(...) We must admit that the results achieved by them would have been infinitely more modest if everyone had, without false cockiness, coldly considered methods that our adversary use and with determination and seriousness he thought about tackling it.

Everywhere was a clash between opposing elements and our, ours were always surprised, destroyed without the enemy has been inflicted any harm.

The myth of the “invincible” Jeep is nothing more than a creation of the imagination of many: the Jeep is not but a common automobile is not an armored vehicle nor is it powerfully armed; owns, compared to our vehicles, faster speeds and a greater chance of moving into the wilderness, but those requirements only serve to meet or to evade the pursuit; Once you come into contact with the opponent, our weapons are as those of the opponent: but we must use them with courage, with cunning, promptly, with the determination to hit before being hit.

Is vain invoke armored or protected; the demeanor held until now by our was such that even with armored vehicles would have been equally overwhelmed (...)”<sup>(72)</sup>.

After the operation *Aberdeen* (5-6 June), the battle of Bir Hakeim (11 June) and tank battles around *Knightsbridge* (12-13 June), Rommel let out the bulk of the British 13<sup>th</sup> Corp. According to von Mellenthin, he committed the mistake of neglecting the 90th Light and to entrust to the XX Corps a little relief. In his opinion, if he led North to Acroma and Balbia all five mobile divisions instead of just the DAK, would be able to continue the 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa and the 50th British and the various Corps media. It may be, though, that on one hand, Rommel did not want to take any chances, despite being aware that he had torn apart the British brigades, and anymore overestimate the residual energies of his troops, which happened often.

There is still one thing to touch: the morale of the troops. In this regard we must make a distinction between units at the front and rear. The army launched the offensive was greeted almost universally with enthusiasm and alive combative spirit, especially in armored units. The first impact with the *Grant* was of sharp and unpleasant surprise but curious was the difference in reaction between Germans and Italians. In the DAK rose up a certain hesitation noting that the efficiency of new vehicles was pulling him enemies in the qualitative superiority hitherto enjoyed. Moreover, the result of successive clashes in which the German weapons were able to impose themselves, albeit with less ease than in the past, gave rise to a strong recovery of confidence. Instead of the Italian armor, i.e. in the *Ariete*, not occurred any initial moral decay and the reason is to be found in the possibilities of the new armament: the 75/18 self propelled, the German 88/56 and gun of 90/53. The experience gained, learned and verification finding that the M 14 certain results could do the rest.

Among Italian troops weighed greatly the problem of changes and licenses too poorly resolved, unresolved even any Central Authority. On moral relations presented by commanders of major units in the month of May you read the comments below.

Commander of the XXI Corps (Gen. Navarini): “the need most felt by soldiers is the alternation and licenses. It would be highly beneficial to improving the spirit and troop efficiency regular implementation-ASAP-the problem of transition after two years spent in N.A., interrupted by the granting of annual license. The implementation of this program can be facilitated by a more rigorous discipline, form part

of the territorial authorities of other licenses, especially for serious family reasons, and from increased speed and a more rigorous control of travel. Until the implementation of this program is not possible, you could compensate with organizing rest camps in the areas best suited to the climate and the abundance of water and other environmental amenities. Those fields could also be suitably equipped for the training. "

Commander of the *Trento* (Gen. Gotti): "the term of 34 months is considered by all soldiers of the *Trento*, which from 14 months are continuously online, as a distant and difficult to reach, even if right now there have been troop replacements or online-it appears-they provide. The idea of spending another 20 months on the front lines in holes of Marmarica, environmental conditions and comfort to all notes, is not something that can produce a high moral, even if there is no clear distinction between who is in the line and needs and lives a life full of dangers and whoever is in the back streets in better conditions, or even in Italy. Therefore the term above-excluded any possibility of license-is considered by soldiers a real exile or not clearly deserved punishment. "

Commander of the *Bologna* (Gen. Gloria): "can not always be easily understood the soldiers the current license-change mechanism, for which the military which has 24 months in N.A. and repatriate remaining for marriage or for serious family reasons or even for exams is relieved from its law, while those who have already gained, for example, 32 months in N.A. and have wife and kids at home will have to wait a further stay in N.A. two lucky months in case that the current provisions may not be varied in restrictively. Improved conditions for transport by sea, the news of troop contingents arrived recently in the port of Benghazi has spread with rapidity, note that if one side has brought the joy of tangible confirmation of Italian dominance in the Mediterranean, has, on the other hand, made more difficult the task of all those responsible for the soldiers to make accessible the complex reasons even after the above improvement, make inoperative the provisions again based on his time to return to rotation and actually limited by restrictive rules".

Commander of *Pavia* (Gen. Torriano): "except in the case of family disasters, it would be preferable to reduce the licenses to a single type, all of which can benefit from periodically after a certain period of time in N.A. has been observed that a wait with term

some very easily, is born a lot more easily than to wait indefinitely. Those who fall by the license back and revitalize with the advantage of the expression acquired in the preceding period spent on this particular operating theater."

Even the Commander of *Trento* about the discontent produced, especially among the officers, the provision for the granting of licenses for examinations and competitions: "it too noted that the vast majority of officers who have been considered the examination or the competition as a means to obtain a license. We come to cases of officers graduates from time, with stable jobs in civilian life, which had the license to appear to take exams for specialization, of which they had never felt the need before the provision that provides the license for such examinations or competitions to places at least important of those bodies which are already stable plant; While there are officers with private or family situation very serious, that cannot be licensed provided their cases come back as those covered. This led to real situations of mutual resentment among officers of these regiments, also provided that all parties licensed or are not returned, or are back after periods much greater than those granted. The situation is altogether worthy of careful consideration on the part of this command, and for that reason I feel the need to clear what it really is, without periphrasis or implied."

Conversely, the military veterans by speaking with disappointment of licenses reveal sensitivity and poor understanding of the moment on the part of the civilian population, especially that of large cities. Much sarcasm was done on cafés posters and signs in stores of the motherland with the admonition: "remember that we are at war." <sup>(73)</sup>

The topic was hot-and will remain until the end of operations in North Africa-enough to be brought to the attention of Mussolini. Deserves mention, in this regard, a surprising letter from the propaganda Bureau Chief of the Comando Superiore, Maj. Gens. Melchiorri, Lieutenant General of militia and political character of a certain relief, addressed directly to Mussolini. On the substance there is little to see. Was rightly highlighted as in future all staff arrivals were absorbed by the need to restore the efficiency of large units, and this is easily guessed, upset troops seeing every day increase the difficulties of repatriation. On the form, on the other hand, are to emphasize the importance given to the character:

*"For the responsibility that I have in this particular*

*Therefore, I must stress field at you because both addressed and resolved once and for all an issue that becomes increasingly difficult as time goes by”; the complacency: “the truth is, and I had not failed to say in Rome, that the enemy has opposed a resistance tenacity and has now learned to wage war against us on our front, where the ability to maneuver is limited by the same forces and troops from the front. And obvious, in fact, that with an opponent who has the sea on the left and the desert on the right, the maneuver is possible only on his right, where he has long organized to face our attack [?] ”; the lack of loyalty to the superior Commander: “I had included in the monthly report of April as in May sent today to the R. Army General Staff the views expressed by commanders of the G. U. on the problem of turnover. They were removed or mitigated by Comando Superiore (...)” and “this attitude: solves the issue though, so I will make known to his Excellency Cavallero reports content moved from commanders to G. U. because he may take it into account, even if the Comando Superiore does not consider the commanders themselves sufficiently orientated on the problem”<sup>(74)</sup>.*

Finally, the feelings against the Germans. They were presented by the Comando Superiore Carabinieri in N.A.:

*“That sense of disguised dislike for the Germans-who have never given evidence of excessive sympathy and esteem for us-already meandering in certain environments, over time takes on increasingly large proportions. While it is known that the outward manifestations of mutual respect, except for sporadic cases have always been poor despite numerous circulars issued by the higher authorities, it can be seen that the expressions of intimate and cordial collaboration are increasingly decreasing.”<sup>(75)</sup>.*

It is true that the painting was valuable primarily for commands and most rearward forces, but also at the forefront of friction were not uncommon. A typical opportunity was offered by the booty taken to Tobruk. You may recall the provisions of Rommel in that regard, and it is easy to imagine how quickly the German units involved in the war were the booty in warehouses, abandoned warehouses and material. As always the rest. Of course, motor vehicles were the greedy mouthful and the *Afrikakorps*, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, the German Logistics apparatus filled with remarkable increase gaps that occurred in the course of the fighting, so much so that, according to Bayerlein, 80% of Rommel's transportation was British backgrounds. It is clear that reading between the lines, the Italian divisions « made do» with only healthy spirit of initiative. And the bitter comment by Mancinelli:

"It certainly reflected this attitude the proud German conception of support for themselves the role of protagonists in the war, surrounded by screaming bevy of modest walk-ons and extras to pay with some crumbs, perfectly suited to the value of their modest stage performance" <sup>(76)</sup>.

Anyway, all things considered, we and objectively conclude that the weight of the weighed in full battle on the shoulders of Rommel and he accepted it without batting an eyelash:

"(...) It was only the will of Rommel-penned yet attentive witness Mancinelli, and critical-competent, inexorably aimed towards achieving the objectives set, to lead not only the Army offensive action, but also to win sometimes hesitant attitudes of superior commands, proceeding with unyielding tenacity in developing a plan that seemed to fail, dragging its determination and with unshakable faith the timid and the doubters, that they durst not openly favor him or her in titanic struggle while not felt to stop him in his offensive fervor" <sup>(77)</sup>.

Bayerlein, the Chief of staff, was more succinctly: *"it may be that Rommel was not a great strategist, but there is no doubt that throughout the German army there was not a general better suited then him to desert war"* <sup>(78)</sup>.

Let's move on now to the next field. General unanimous admission for the capture of Tobruk was considered in Great Britain and in Commonwealth a disaster second only to Singapore's surrender. Governments and public opinion demanded astonished as he could crumble in twenty-four hours a fort that had resisted a siege of seven months with a garrison of equal entities. What had happened to the 8th Army? Initially surfaced attempting to justify the event with the numerical superiority of Axis divisions-three armored divisions and four of infantry of Rommel against two armored and four of infantry in the hands of Ritchie--but the comparison, which among other things did not take into account the existence of two motorized brigades and two tank brigades, was clearly specious and superficial. Soon the counts were done on other basis, i.e. the number of wagons, of artillery and aircraft. However, as we know, the correlation of forces favored the 8<sup>th</sup> Army: about 3 to 2 for the tanks at the beginning of the offensive, destined to become much more relevant in the course of the fighting, when the fight had taken on character of attrition, as very probable; 2 to 1 for the artillery and 1.5 to 1 for planes. Given this initial situation, the questions itself intensifies.

You could investigate the quality and are known the disquisitions on armor, speed and armament of the various types of opposing tanks <sup>(79)</sup>.



Also in this regard does not end with a technical inferiority compared to *Panzer* tanks and on the other hand - it was rightly pointed out - the even blatantly inadequate Italian M 13 tanks more than once had faced successfully superior enemy formations<sup>(80)</sup>. The discourse can be repeated for field artillery and combat aircraft. The only exception concerns the anti-tank artillery. For caliber and mass number of Italian-German maneuver was simply: it in fact had 48 - 88/56 pieces and 117 pieces of Soviet war booty 76.2. with the DAK and 8 - 88/56 pieces, many from 90/53 and 16 self-propelled of 75/18 with XX Corp. But, obviously, this point could not be decisive. In short, consider the figures, they found that materials not the determining factor quantity and/or quality which provoked the collapse of the Italian 10<sup>th</sup> Army in 1940-41. The prime causes should be sought elsewhere: in training, in employment and in the action of the command.

British qualified sources have openly admitted the existence of a large percentage of untrained and poorly trained personnel in the ranks of the 8th Army, which explains, for example, the contrast between the good behavior of the Guards and the disappointing response to the expectations of the 6 pounder guns known just now distributed. It also explains the misconduct of defense of Tobruk by the command of the 2nd South African Division. It was also noted the persistence of a generally poor cooperation between the various arms, which led to severe failure of Operation *Aberdeen* and insufficient power of armored groups. This underlying defect, attributed by individuals to the presence or traces of a certain spirit of parochialism among the various British arms, greatly, especially weighed against the Germans, who excelled in.

The use of the media was very conception to maneuver. Let us dwell on two main points: the tanks and artillery. Auchinleck had recommended several times that the armored divisions were used as such, for the use with the Norrie with carrying elasticity. Found a stubborn lack of feedback in Ritchie and indeed does not seem to be free from censorship even Norrie and Messervy.

The germ of defeat was, in the opinion of many, in the staid and rigid mentality of the man and his command, which had led to two pernicious initial steps: splitting into two forces, separating those of the mobile infantry (as if Rommel did not equally and as if non-motorized troops could play

a different role from that static in an environment like that); split the defense responsibilities, assigning a northern sector of defenses to infantry strongholds of Gott and the southern sector where maneuver armored forces Norrie (as if Rommel had not done likewise on their positions by Gasr el-Ambar to Segnali Sud). Frankly, such accusations appear too "a thesis". It is not difficult to argue, without going too far from the truth, that the theories are neither good nor bad.

It all depends who implements. Comes to mind a mischievous comment of Colin: "when Napoleon was with the French on the edge of the battle area and the Austrians gathered in the Middle, they were surrounded. When Napoleon was at the Center and the Austrians collected at the edges, these were cut off." The pure and simple truth is that Ritchie, like Cunningham, could not compete with Rommel in terms of clarity of conception, clarity of thought, energy, quickness of execution decision, adaptability to changing battle during events.

If Auchinleck preferred a location of the armored forces more or less around *Knightsbridge*, straddling the Trigh Capuzzo, and Ritchie instead South of this, there were those who would adopt a very different solution. "*Where would he take his armor-asks Rommel to Bayerlein, prior to the offensive-if he was in place of General Ritchie?*".

Bayerlein replied that he would held in place very backward, in the area of el-Adem, without putting them in the fight until the enemy had penetrated well to reverse the positions of Gazala, to strike decisively on the flank. "*He's crazy-Rommel replied- will not ever do a similar thing*" <sup>(81)</sup>. In fact, not made.

According to most critics Norrie's Corp would have to collect at Trigh el Abd, able to intervene against the opponent's wraparound wing *since the beginning* of the maneuver. Though, frankly, the most serious error doesn't seem to turn up in 30<sup>th</sup> Corp's initial location, as in the tearing up of the 7th Armored Division of Messervy. The latter fact was explained by the tendency of desert veterans to a wide dispersion, both to reduce vulnerability to the raids is to try any camouflage on a land that offered little or no protection. Really turned into a free gift for Rommel, though-it's good to put it in evidence – even this decisive. In spite of the disaster that destroyed the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade, swept the 4th Armored Brigade and scattered the 7th Motor Brigade, on the evening of the 28<sup>th</sup> Ritchie could put together again

420 efficient tanks, while the DAK was left with about 150 tanks and the *Ariete* with ninety. The game was to play and it will be over the next few days until June 13.

The failings of the British commanders occurred during the conduct of the action. Since the first evening Rommel, despite the undeniable concerns, kept much optimism through the intervention of the British armored brigades fragmentary. In fact, persevered in a Ritchie disharmonious, unattached, of forces. The brigades were thrown into the furnace to straggling or otherwise without the leadership of Division Command or, much less, of the Corps. So, as in the first 48 hours Italian-German divisions were diluted by Eluet et-Tamar at Bir Hakeim, they suffered severe damage. So was not prevented the Elimination of 150th Brigade at Got el-Ualeb or even *Aberdeen* was launched with a massive and decisive blow. Always the bump had frontal character and lack of coordination, always proved costly and he missed the goal. And add, using massed British heavy artillery never had to flourish unless fixed in advance. Rommel had with him two Corps artillery groups -*Arko 104* on built four groups and the Nicolini Artillery Command with two groups-whose single fire forging learned from time to time use in addition to Divisional artillery where useful or necessary, but nothing like it was predicted by the opposing side <sup>(82)</sup>.

On 11 June Ritchie could still put in about 350 tanks, i.e. more than double the DAK, yet failed to prevent the following day two of his brigades were trapped and almost completely taken by the *Panzerdivisionen* and the third was held by the Germans without toil far from the battle ground. On the evening of the 13<sup>th</sup> he had fifty among cruisers and *Grant* and twenty infantry wagons and Rommel, remained master of the battlefield, conquered even the numerical superiority <sup>(83)</sup>!

The time of the fierce fighting occurred after the fall of Bir Hakeim and the defeat of the British Armored units, when Rommel showed up, so to speak, on the direction of arrival. Now the command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army could not have more hopes of victory, but surely the solution chosen was not the best way to contain the Italian-German success. In the opinion of Bayerlein, Ritchie was supposed to replicate directly on border positions and, in any case, the attempt to hold Tobruk with defensive features plainly reduced, a somewhat improvised garrison and a little experienced Commander, was a bad decision <sup>(84)</sup>.

“The battle-observed Gen. Whiteley, a few weeks after the fall of the fortress-is to be considered not fought on the Gazala, though here it is developed, but in the global zone Gazala-Hakeim-el Adem-Tobruk.

You may not think that the battle could go ahead if Tobruk or el-Adem were falling. It was all one big area. In fact, the schema of the retreat had been overhauled and a decision about the retreat from that particular area could not be taken until Tobruk or el-Adem were not captured by the enemy or very seriously invested.

It wasn't a line at Gazala, a line at Tobruk and then another line to Gambut. If the battle was lost, the retreat would be going up at the border. It was a place of considerable depth and Tobruk and el-Adem included in this depth”<sup>(85)</sup>.

Certain it is that Ritchie did not realize the full scope of the defeat suffered on the back of Gazala and this misjudgment let go with a design too complex in operating similar contingencies: establish a new battle West of Tobruk el-Adem-Bir el Gobi; organize to defend border positions; preparing a counter-offensive.

One of the reasons those deeper shortcomings in command action as well as those that occurred after the fall of Bir Hakeim and the withdraw of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp from Gazala, was found in the relationship between the Commander of the 8th Army and his Corps commanders:

“Undoubtedly-observed Carver, who well knew the characters in question-the events were influenced by the fact that Norrie and Gott were close friends and that he had great respect for the experience and judgment of the second. Both believed that Ritchie was overly swayed by Auchinleck. Had the feeling that many of the suggestions or orders they received were originally from parties in Cairo without that of Ritchie had made changes to them in order to adapt them to the needs of the situation at the front.

The frequency with which those orders were based on an assessment that was not reflected in deeds what they saw (often inaccurately) confirmed this impression, which is further strengthened when Ritchie gave its support to operation *Buckshot*, the offensive planned for June 1942.

Was justified or not, there is no doubt that in May 1942 there was a mutual distrust among many commanders at different levels. It was a kind of distrust complex, based largely on the diversity of countries of origin of the various formations. Diversity which itself was another source of confusion and delay in full command action”<sup>(86)</sup>.

NOTES FOR CHAPTER FIVE

- 1 G. FIORAVANZO, op. cited above, p. 221 et seq.
  - 2 I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 183.
  3. Ibid p. 189.
  4. USSME minutes of meetings held by the head of the G.S General, vol. III, Rome 1985, p. 586.
  5. Ibid. p. 563.
  6. Ibid p. 580.
  7. Ibid p. 582-583.
  8. Ibid p. 585.
  9. Ibid p. 571.
  10. Diary Cavallero 12.6.1942 date.
  11. G. FIORAVANZO, op. cited above, p. 238.
  12. For the naval battle of June please refer especially to G. FIORAVANZO, op. cited above, p. 230 et seq.; A. SANTONI and F. MATTESINI, op. cited above, p. 371 et seq.; I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 229 et seq.
  13. G. SANTORO., op. cited above, p. 390-391.
  14. G. FIORAVANZO, op. cited above, p. 333-334.
  15. C. AUCHINLECK, Dispatch cit., apt. n. 6.
  16. Ibid, apt. n. 9.
  17. W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 425.
  18. Ibid, p. 426.
  19. J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 575.
  20. Ibid, p. 575-576.
  21. Ibid.
  22. Ibid, p. 581. See AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, op. cited above, p. 107.
  23. J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 578.
  24. Ibid, p. 578.
  - 25 C. AUCHINLECK, Dispatch, p. 326.
  - 26 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 579.
  - 27 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 429.
  28. J.A.I AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 117-118.
  29. Ibid, p. 107-108.
  - 30 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 158.
  - 31 F.W. VON MELLENTIN, op. cited above, p. 142.
  32. The residual consistency of two divisions of the XX Corps were the following. The *Ariete* had 50 tanks, 17 armored cars, 26 field pieces, 7 pieces from 88 mm. and 3 of 90 mm., 10 semoventi 75/18, 19 guns A/T of 47/32, 19 A/T guns of 20 and 13 *Solothurn* ATR. The *Trieste* still had 14 tanks, 11 armored cars, 42 field pieces, 33 A/T guns of 47/32 and 45 of 20. The staff reached the 75% of the organic tables, but losses chiefly on fighters elements and specialized. The Corps artillery had a 105/28-piece and twelve of 149/28.
  33. According to Auchinleck, the 8th Army had a total of 500 tanks. Of these, 308 were in the workshop for repairs of varying degrees and other 40 being return to the units. Of those, 48 efficient *Valentine* and *Matilda* were in Tobruk and 23 at the border. Remained in line to 4th Brigade 80 tanks, but a Squadron (a score of media) was assigned to the 7th Motorized Brigade reinforcement (Dispatch cit., p. 361).
- According to Carver, the 4th Armored Brigade had around 90 tanks (op. cited, p. 183), without distinguishing the squadron transferred in to the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade. It is very likely-judging from the situation after the collision on June 17 that the differences are dependent on the forty ongoing means of delivery to units.

- 34 According to Auchinleck the Brigade had lost 20 tanks (Dispatch cit., p. 361). Carver does not speak of numeric entities for losses; Liddell Hart, referring to historical diaries, precise units a total of 9 tanks out of action and adds: "*Although a considerable number [tanks] was posted in the workshop for repairs, 58 remained available for use the next day*" (op. cit., p. 183).
- 35 The columns had to be provided-three per brigade-from 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Motorized Brigade, from the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division and the English 50<sup>th</sup>. From the tanks of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade.
- 36 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, pp. 587-588.
- 37 Letter dated 19.6.1942, hours 14:30 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 589). To detect a comment *a posteriori* of the son of Mar. Smuts "*all we knew we wouldn't have committed the most dangerous mistake to attempt the defense of Tobruk or any other isolated stronghold. The minefields and other defenses of Tobruk were not therefore ever adequately equipped for a siege. It was therefore clear that Tobruk could not be defended. The decision to defend it, taken at the last moment by the higher authorities, there came completely by surprise. The decision was certainly by Churchill or some other very high character. The fact that my father, who had been opposed to the decision, not to urge an investigation can never possibly be significant*" (C. BARNETT, op. cited, p. 238).
- 38 F.H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, p. 387.
- 39 I.S.O PLA YFAIR, op. cited above, p. 260.
- 40 In January, two groups of semoventi 75/18 of the 133<sup>rd</sup> artillery, tanks of the 133<sup>rd</sup> infantry tank and the accompanying weapons battalion and the anti-tank 12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri were ceded to the *Ariete*. In March the group from 90/53 and two batteries of 20 mm. of the 133<sup>rd</sup> artillery passed to *Ariete*, and in April reconstituted the X Tank battalion entered the organic of the 132<sup>nd</sup> tank, while the XI Tank battalion was assigned to *Trieste*. Additionally the Division had to yield all the vehicles to the Intendenza Superiore, which sought to overcome the very serious situation of operation of transport means.
- 41 In fact, the main limitation placed on the use of the *Littorio*, concerned the constraint of its use to the West of the border. "*It was due-as later explained to Barbasetti Mancinelli-rumors here together, but we don't know if true, of operational. understanding of Gen Rommel who would be contrary to Supercomando Directive*" (DSCSAS, tele/11828 date 01 19.6.1942).
- 42 According to Auchinleck the 32<sup>nd</sup> tank Brigade had 48 infantry tanks, but likely was referring to efficient ones. PlayFair and Carver indicate, on the other hand, 61 efficient tanks: 35 *Valentine* and 4<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* 26 *Valentine* and *Matilda* of 7<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*. According to Liddell Hart the 4<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* had 39 *Valentine* and 7<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* 26 tanks between *Valentine* and *Matilda* plus 5 *Grant* of the 1<sup>st</sup> *Royal Tanks*, for a total of 71 tanks (op. cited, pp. 182-183). Finally, Neil Orpen says "*about 50 efficient tanks*" (*War in the Desert*, Cape Town and Johannesburg, 1971, p. 311).
- 43 the data are those submitted by Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F Turner (op. cited, p. 135). Carver shares in total, but only eight pieces of 6 pounds (op. cited, p. 299). According to Playfair the garrison had 15 pieces 6 lbs, 32 of 2 lbs and 8 Bofors (op. cited, p. 262).
- 44 in early afternoon, Ritchie phoned Tobruk and the head of intelligence service 2nd South African Division is said to have prodded Norrie to cooperate with the fortress to free the Bir Batruna battalion. The interlocutor did not dare to tell the Commander of the army that Batruna was in enemy hands by four days and if his saying that the position was falling that day and that it would be informed.
45. J.A.I AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 157.
- 46 The 6th South African Brigade was composed of the I and II Police Battalion and the II *Transvaal* Battalion. The 4th Brigade consisted of: II *Royal Durban Light*, by the *Umvoti Mounted Rifles*, the *Blake Group* (complex of three companies provided by the I *Royal Durban Light*, from the *Imperial Light Horse* and the *Rand Light Infantry*) and *Kaffarian Rifles*. The 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade was composed of The II *Cameron Highlanders*, the II/5<sup>th</sup> *Maharattas*, II/7<sup>th</sup> *Gurkhas* and the Beer Group (represented by a battalion formation of the of the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division).

- 47 This group was based essentially on the 7th Armored Division, whose Commander Messervy had been sacked from his post and replaced by Gen. J.M.L. Renton.
48. J.A.I AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 157.
- 49 F.H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, p. 387. You are not able to locate the individual unit referred to the dispatch, mostly ignoring what time was tied up in the news. Maybe the *Trieste*?
50. Ibid
51. J.A.I AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 158.
52. Ibid pp. 158-159.
- 53 It is true that at 06:15 on Gen. von Bismarck replaced at once, the Commander of the 900<sup>th</sup> pioneers battalion for unsatisfactory preparation of bridges for the anti-tank ditch (AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, p. 161).
54. Testimony of then Leut. Ennio Calabria (GIULIO BEDESCHI, *Fronte d'Africa c'ero anch'io*, Mursia, Milano 1979, p. 158).
- 55 Gen. Thompson, Commander of the backline, at 18:00 had ordered on own initiative of the demolition process, causing considerable damage to the port facilities and to some water tanks and gasoline. Escaped from the port two minesweepers and thirteen ships of various types.
56. I.S.O PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 272.
57. Ibid
58. Ibid
59. J.A.I AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.G. TURNER, op. cited above, p. 215. It must be said that, after the decision of surrender, occurred several isolated attempts to escape capture. The most important were two. The first was carried out around noon of the 21<sup>st</sup> on the front of the 61<sup>st</sup> infantry, not just including a sortie, open fire immediately immobilizing many means, inducing others to re-enter the city and capturing about 500 prisoners.
- A second took place on the morning of May 22, with 60 vehicles and armored cars, by the remnants of the II *Coldstream*, which added many other elements. The group came from Ras Medauuar and fell below the fire of the II/46<sup>th</sup> artillery of the *Trento*, which caused casualties and the capture of 83 prisoners, due to the dust clouds and intervals in the XXI Corps deployment the bulk (about 200 *Guards* and South Africans) managed to earn *Knightsbridge*, where he met a patrol of 4<sup>th</sup> South African armored cars who guided them to safety.
60. On the surrender of the garrison of Tobruk he considers appropriate clarification. At 07:00 of June 21 to a British officer, with signs and exterior of parliamentary formalities, he introduced himself to the *Trento*. Led to Division Command, claiming to be allowed to negotiate the surrender of the fortress on behalf of Gen. Klopfer. The Gen. Navarini, the messenger immediately aware, he communicated the news to the Commander of the *Panzerarmee*, while the parliamentarian, the result has no official status, was returned to his Command to provide prescribed documents.
- Instead, the course had a similar request made-you are not able to say if the incident mentioned at the same time or subsequently, to the German lines.
- The army command ordered at 09:00 the suspension of fire. This situation and the break now wherever the XXI Corps troops between the forts of the defensive perimeter and the surrender of the entire South African units made it past the formalities of surrender.
- 61 it is worth bringing back the comment of an Italian officer present at the surrender of the *Highlanders*: “*The morning after [= 21 June] everything was finished, and two scenes have remained imprinted in my memory: that of a Scottish Division (which was said to be granted the honor of arms), which passed by proud and impeccable in the wake of bagpipes, kilt, towards the place collecting prisoners and, later (...), one of a platoon of infantrymen of the Brescia, headbands horizontally wide apart, which proceeded slowly, walking with obvious signs of fatigue, dragging behind a big Solothurn rifle*” (testimony of then Leut. Ennio Calabria, G. BEDESCHI, op. cited above, p. 161)
62. Unable to put the new insignia, Rommel retained as General of the Army. Was on the positions of el-Alamein that Kesselring, noting the fact, gave him a pair of his rank insignia.

63. M. CARVER, op. cited, p. 216.
64. The "good source" dried up suddenly on June 29. British part some time already had raised doubts and suspicions by reading the cipher texts from *Luftwaffe* Enigma and *Panzerarmee* and eventually identified the source of the leak.
65. H.O. BEHRENDT, op. cited above, p. 207.
66. F.W. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 134.
67. DSCSAS, tele/01 10424/0 p. 31.5.1942 date.
68. DSCS, quoted tele 31045/0 p. 2.6.1942 date.
69. G. MANCINELLI, op. cited above, p. 106.
70. DSCSAS f. 2901 2.6.1942 date of Col. Mancinelli.
71. DSCSAS tele 15.6.1942 date 3048 of Col. Mancinelli.
72. DSCSAS f. Ol/11745/0 p. 18.6.1942 date.
73. Synthesis of the report sent by the S.M.R.E. to the Ministry of war with f. 0305/P/II/21.6.1942 date 2.
74. Personal letter to Il Duce in 7.6.1942-date Annex No. 18.
75. DSCSAS f. 2/9 R.P. 11.6.1942 date of Comando Superiore CC.RR. of the A.S.
76. G. MANCINELLI, op. mentioned "pp. 122-123.
77. Ibid p. 110.
78. D. YOUNG, op. cited "p. 179.
79. See. LIDDELL HART, *The tanks* cit., pp. 154-157 and M. CARVER, op. cited above, pp. 327-332. 80 M. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 327.
81. D. YOUNG, op. cited above, p. 168.
82. 104 Artillery Command (Arko 104) was constituted by the following groups: 408<sup>th</sup> with a battery of 149/28 (Italian), a 170 and one of 76.2; II/115<sup>th</sup> with a battery of 210, one of 170 and one of 100; 528<sup>th</sup> with two batteries 150 guns and howitzers of 150; 533<sup>rd</sup> with 150 mm. guns battery, a 150 and two howitzers of 100. Nicolini had artillery command of XXXIII/8<sup>th</sup> with three batteries of 149/40 and LII/8<sup>th</sup> with two 152/37.
83. Lost of the battlefield meant losing the ability to recover damaged tanks. To give an idea of the amount of work done by British camp workshops, suffice it to say that until 13 June were recovered at least 417 damaged tanks and, of these, 210 had been returned into efficiency, 122 sent to higher level shops at the base and the rest was in progress on site (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR., op. cited, p. 243).
84. D. YOUNG, op. cited "p. 173.
- 85 J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 739.
- 86 M. CARVER, op. mentioned "pp. 320-321.



## Chapter Sixth EXPLOITATION OF SUCCESS

### 1. THE OPERATIONAL DILEMMA

If you need an example of how you can pursue time and favorable events, we should just take you to sample the morning of June 21. At 08:30, soon learned of the offer of surrender by Klopfer, Rommel ordered the *Trieste* (minus the Battle Group of Vaiarini) moved immediately in the area of Sidi Rezegh, facing East-Southeast. At 09:45 to all dependent commands the message: “*The fortress of Tobruk has capitulated. All units come together and prepare for further advance.*” At noon that the 21st *Panzer* to go with urgency at Gambut and that at the dawn of the 23<sup>rd</sup> the XX Corps was collected between Sidi Rezegh and Bir el Chleta;- the XXI Corp focus astride the via Balbia, West of Tobruk, ready to resume movement and the X Corps it carried with it the *Brescia* and the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri at Gambut, leaving the *Pavia* around el-Adem.

In the afternoon the Corps commanders were summoned to report to the city. New orders were granted for the annihilation of enemy troops stationed at the border. The XXI Corps was to reach quickly, and in any event before the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Bardia and the X stay west of Fort Campbell to disengage the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, destined to act in the area of Sidi Omar to protect the right of the army. The XX Corps remained for the moment in the area of Bir Bu Creimisa-Sidi Rezegh-Bir el Chleta and DAK had to gather at Gasr el-Arid on the Trigh Capuzzo. For both it was entrusted, for the 24<sup>th</sup>, the envelopment of Sidi Omar and continuation of the maneuver towards the Sollum and Sidi el Barrani coast, so as to eliminate any enemy resistance remaining. To garrison Tobruk remained the *San Marco* battalion and the II/40<sup>th</sup> infantry while at el-Adem was the II/19<sup>th</sup> infantry.

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*Note of Italian cartography.* According to the criteria of the main Italian cartography of the time, in places it has always shown the article Arabic el with an initial lowercase letter and a dash of conjunction (e.g.: el-Adem, el-Agheila), omitting the hyphen for clarity only the designation of a number of places (e.g.: Marsa Al Brega -el Agheila). Also adopted the assimilation of article to certain consonants: ed-Duda for el-Duda, er- Rzem to el-Rzem).

British cartography, however, does not include neither the lowercase (El Alamein) nor the dash (Dar el Brug) or assimilation (El Daba). As a result, and following the criteria used by the Italian, especially military cartography, to the localities situated in Egyptian territory, writing the name follows the British rules.

At this point it is necessary to consider the action at the highest level. In the same afternoon of 21 June Kesselring arrived in flight from Sicily. He was the first person of higher rank to go personally to Tobruk after the victory and the interview-according to von Mellenthin, present at the meeting-he soon much vivacity. For Kesselring was granted that, as decided by the OKW and the Comando Supremo, was now the turn of *Hercules*, especially since Malta was showing signs of recovery from the horrendous air raids it was subject to. Rommel grew completely different ideas: now it was necessary to build on the success without waiting for the Malta enterprise and, in front of the firmness of his interlocutor in wanting to respect the established strategic plan, and then postpone the invasion of Egypt (impossible without a support aircraft) the occupation of the island, is altered. Admitted that the *Panzerarmee* had suffered heavy casualties during the entire battle, but his warning the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was worse and know that you couldn't let an opportunity slip for a deep penetration in Egypt. In depth ... to the Suez Canal. A delay of a few weeks would have allowed the enemy to regain breath and prevent the achievement of that goal. The interview ended and each of his own opinion. Kesselring said clearly that he intended to move to Sicily the reinforcements given to von Waldau for the offensive; Rommel stiffened and the evening turned to Berlin <sup>(1)</sup>.

In Rome had come first the news of the fall of Tobruk, then wheel, the communication of operational orientation of Bastico: “(...) achieving conquest *Sollum - Halfaya-Sidi Omar* line as *Comando Supremo* directives 30760 of date 5 May” <sup>(2)</sup>. Cavallero's response was immediate: Mussolini pleased compliance directives of May 5 and, while he noted the need for the “accommodation” of the army on the front Sollum -Halfaya was promptly had their air units for Operation Malta, or better C. 3 according to the formal Italian name, were offered freedom with urgency. “Communicated this by the Duce to Marshal Kesselring” specified Cavallero. Finally called attention to the opportunity to retake Giarabub <sup>(3)</sup>. It should be said at once that Mussolini was actually more unwilling to stop at the border: “*Il Duce is in a excellent mood and sets out to go to Africa-* Ciano wrote in his diary on the 22<sup>nd</sup> -. *In truth he was the proponent of the decisive attack, even against the advice of the Comando Supremo. Now he fears that you don't know and you don't dare take advantage of the success. His confidence is only for Rommel: Rome has already started a soothing telegram, saying that should not go beyond the line Fort Capuzzo- Sollum*”. However, for objectivity, we must

also say that by Cavallero was not rigid position, but a serious and well-founded concerns about the lack of fuel and the overseas transport crisis.

As was mentioned, the Comando Supremo sees the situation dominated by two nightmares: nafta and supplies to Libya. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, at the meeting on transport, Gen. Weininger, which reported a British convoy of ten ships and a tanker, escorted by two cruisers and four destroyers, headed presumably to Malta, Adm. Sansonetti had objected, the wisdom: “*against this convoy, as far as the Navy, we cannot oppose it except by submarines because our ships are absolutely empty*” and the Gen. Santoro noted that R. Aeronautica had only seven torpedoes for the torpedo planes <sup>(4)</sup>. Under the impression of this state of affairs, on 20 June Cavallero submitted for signature to Mussolini's a letter to Hitler, when started by saying the happy outcome of the naval battle of mid June and the imminent foreseeable success in Marmarica, recalled in clear and precise terms the need for implementing the operation *Hercules* scheduled for tomorrow, not in addition:

“(…) This action on Malta applies more than ever. Really substantial effects of air mass actions undertaken by axis aircraft, mainly from II *Luftflotte* in April have prolonged their effectiveness during May; but now, in June, Malta, replenished constantly hearing, has recovered its aerial offensive capability, so that today our sailing for Libya is once again made very difficult. Now, to preserve the achievements in Marmarica and meet future needs you should be able to perform the security necessary enough for transport. On the basis of this requirement is the nafta (…).

Now our warships have oil depots and supplying them with is no longer possible; a second release of our naval forces is not now possible and therefore to a new attempt to resupply Malta we won't be able to resist but that limited to submarine action in addition to the action, not always possible for weather conditions, of the torpedo planes (…)

The requirement calculation of nafta meant 40,000 tons for Malta, which were to be delivered to Italy at least one week before the end of July, plus another 30,000 tons reserved for the R. Marina.

I must also add-continued the letter-that August is the time last year that allows you to perform the operation on Malta; After that would be the summer of 1943 with the consequences that you, Führer, you know perfectly.

The occupation of Malta, as well as solve the problem of the traffic in the Mediterranean (Libya-Egypt), we would return the total of our helpful

air force, which are now placed under the Mediterranean sector and so remain until Malta remains in possession of the enemy. The release of the air force, together with the other benefits of Malta, would mean for us the re-acquisition of freedom of maneuver, primordial importance factor for victory (...)”<sup>(5)</sup>.

On June 22 Cavallero received von Rintelen and asked him if, in his view, the army should continue their advance towards Egypt, or stop at the border or just beyond and give precedence to the conquest of Malta. “*Without hesitation-recalled von Rintelen-I replied that Malta was clearly at the forefront and that was supposed to be running the plan agreed with the OKW*”<sup>(6)</sup>. Cavallero then explained that he simply wanted to know his thoughts and be personally convinced of the urgency of the operation C 3, “*an indispensable condition to have freedom of maneuver and not be blindsided if continuation of operations in Libya*”<sup>(7)</sup>.

But that evening came to Rome a telegram of Rommel to von Rintelen:

“The first objective of the army of Africa, and that is to beat the opponent's field army to retake Tobruk, was achieved. Parts of the enemy are still at Sollum, Halfaya, Sidi Omar. There is the intention to annihilate now this enemy and open the way to the Interior of Egypt. The conditions and the mood of the troop, the current situation provisioning based on war booth reserves and the current weakness of the enemy to chase up in the heart of the Egyptian area. Therefore please get at the Duce to lift the restriction on the freedom of action into force so far and I have granted all troops currently under my command for the continuation of the fight”<sup>(8)</sup>.

Soon von Rintelen phoned Jodl, who, aware of Hitler's intentions, he said that the conquest of Tobruk had changed the State of things, so the enterprise of Malta did not appear necessary anymore. Von Rintelen claims to have protested, but to no avail; Therefore, he resigned to behave in accordance with new directives<sup>(9)</sup>. In this spirit, the arrangement of the 23<sup>rd</sup>, at 11:10, up from Cavallero and discussed on the ideas of Rommel and especially on those of the OKW. Cavallero was deeply convinced of the urgent need to get rid of Malta and had always followed and prodded the preparations and joint planning. Finding himself baffled by the OKW, which radically, changed the agreements, while showing positive concrete objections formulated:

“I reply that we do not have rigid ideas and we are ready to change projects. However, it is to keep in mind the difficulty and supplies of fuel oil. I say that even if you have found a month of food you need to initiate *immediately* the supply for the advance. Add to that an advanced air force required a lot more of (...).

Do I mind that the enemy reaction to our action towards Egypt could cause an action in Tunisia and we must in any case look from that part”,

then, knowing who was the true holder of power of decision, explicitly asked: “*to specify if the Führer has decided to forgo action on Malta*”<sup>(10)</sup>. Then he went from Mussolini. It is unclear when von Rintelen has delivered the response by Hitler to Mussolini. Maybe before you go by Cavallero, maybe later. Certain it is that: Cavallero must know the document at Palazzo Venezia, because, upon his return to the Palace at 12:30 Vidoni, the first argument that he negotiated with Adm. Riccardi was “the *operating understandings of the Führer is for Egypt.*”

Riccardi--held a very pessimistic attitude. Just two days before had felt a duty to draw the attention of the Comando Supremo on traffic to North Africa. Stop the effects of intense air pounding – he had written-Malta had quickly redeeming a strong aerial offensive capability, while in the Central Mediterranean the submarine attacks had intensified to such an extent over the past. In view of the planned short duration of Rommel's offensive, traffic with Libya had been considerably reduced. Nevertheless, in a few days they had lost two steamers, two fast motorships and a destroyer by submarines or enemy aircraft. The events of the middle of June had led to the total paralysis of maritime movements, but the later development of Marmarica operations had made it essential to the resumption of traffic. And here the first convoy had been made a target of a massive air strikes, with the sinking of the steamer *Reichenberg* (although the enemy had lost many aircraft). The situation, basically, was this: the routes of east and west were too risky; the escorts were limited and it was even more fuel; the number of fast motorships was counted and, moreover, recourse to the few ships incredibly long risk. “*It is therefore absolutely essential-concluded exhibition of Supermarina-if you want to continue to feed Libya, start ASAP and strong pressure on the Maltese bases.*”<sup>(11)</sup>

Also, just at 11:15 of that morning by phone, Riccardi had reiterated that “*we cannot guarantee a supply*

*adjust to Tobruk, but suppress Malta*". As emerges from Cavallero's diary, the brief interview was discouraging.

Mussolini's letter, sent on June 21, had been delivered by Marras in a time of universal exaltation. Some time later, a Swedish observer had to comment:

"The fall of Tobruk made a huge impression in Berlin and throughout Germany. The morale got up immediately to a level never reached since the end of the battle of France in 1940. Rommel was the man of the day, that nothing was impossible. Maybe we can win the war after all, said everybody, and abandoned to the joy of a victory that could truly be a win"<sup>(12)</sup>.

In a climate like infectious and bearing in mind the news and advanced perspectives from Rommel, no wonder very much if the persistent hostility of Hitler's intimate to C 3 acquired explicit form and substance. Already in May, while in Germany they stirred the preparations for *Hercules*, with Gen. Student, Commander of the XI *Fliegerkorps*, was convened at the headquarters of the Führer. Received from Gen. Jeschonnek, Chief of staff of the Luftwaffe, was saying: "*Student, tomorrow you will receive from the Führer a difficult task. Gen. Crüwell, the Afrikakorps, was here this morning. Among other things he spoke also of the Italian troop's morale. Crüwell expressed in this regard a very bad judgment. Therefore the entire enterprise of Malta is in danger!*"<sup>(13)</sup>. The next day Student exhibited in front of a large audience the plans drawn up in Rome. Hitler showed accepting them substantially, however, in closing, express your own ... enthusiastic thoughts to the allies:

"The beachhead [in Malta] is guaranteed by its airborne troops. Well! Then I guarantee that will happen as follows: when will begin the attack, of course the British fleet from Alexandria will immediately, and also from Gibraltar will leave British forces. So you can see what will the Italians at this point. With the arrival of the first messages, all will be back, including the Navy warships and transports. Then, he will be alone with his paratroopers on the island!".

Student not only was a supporter of the enterprise, but calculated that at worst German paratroopers would have been enough, in the understanding of course that Malta was previously brought to its knees by preliminary aerial bombardment. Thus replied:

"In this regard provided Field Marshal Kesselring. Will happen to the British as in Crete last year, when Richtofen's attacked and sank a part of Alexandria's squadron. And possibly even worse, because Malta is in reach of the *Luftwaffe*. The flight from Sicily

to Malta is shorter than that of Greece to Crete. On the other hand, for the British the distance by sea is double of what separates them from Crete. Then, my Führer, Malta can become the grave of the British fleet in the Mediterranean”<sup>(14)</sup>.

But there's more. The 15 June Hitler told Raeder that abetted by Kesselring insisted to resolve once the problem of Malta:

“I accept entirely the importance of Malta. But I do not think, however, that this can be done while the offensive on the eastern front is ongoing and I don't think that you can do with Italian troops. The Luftwaffe does not have the transport airplanes available. Once that Tobruk is taken, many cargo ships will be directed at Tobruk via Crete (avoiding Malta). On the other hand British efforts to bring convoys to Malta, from East and West, attest to the serious situation in which the island lies. These convoys, incidentally, we offer ways to inflict serious damage on the enemy. Once Malta is fully bled and exhausted by the continuous air raids and total block, we may venture to the attack”<sup>(15)</sup>.

When, therefore, Rommel caused him to ask permission to exploit the victory, despite negative opinion of Kesselring and of Raeder and Hitler allowed immediately:

“Field Marshal Rommel is noted on the war diary of the *Seekriegsleitung* dated 22 June-has the purpose to continue the offensive. The Duce will not give the green light, but wants to withdraw the forces planned to carry out the operation *Hercules*. The Führer, by means of a phone call to our General at the Italian Comando Supremo or possibly to the Duce, wants to give a free hand to Rommel and is in the concept that *Hercules* may be postponed to the end of August”<sup>(16)</sup>.

Instead, Hitler responded personally to Mussolini, capturing the moment that militarily seemed to him "*a historic breakthrough*" in relation to an entire war:

“(…) Destiny, Duce, has given us a chance that under no circumstances will present a second time on the same theater of war. The more totalitarian and rapid exploitation of it is in my opinion the main military perspective. Until now I've always done for so long and completely follow every enemy defeated what has been allowed by our chances. The British 8<sup>th</sup> Army was virtually destroyed (...).

If now the remains of the British army were not pursued until every man's last breath, would the same thing that did escape the success to the British, when, at short distance from Tripoli, they suddenly stopped to send forces to Greece (...). If now our forces do not go to the extreme limit of the possible into the very *heart* of Egypt, then firstly a new influx of American bombers (...). In addition

it would follow a concentration of all English forces and American everywhere collectable. In short it follows a change in the situation in our disfavor. But the relentless pursuit of the enemy will lead to the breakup. This time Egypt can, under certain conditions, be torn from England (...).

So if I, Duce, in this historic time that will not be repeated, I can give you some advice that comes from the heart most caring, it is this: order the continuation of the operations up to the complete annihilation of the British troops, until your command and Marshal Rommel believe can do militarily with his forces. The goddess of luck in battle passes alongside the leaders only once. Who does not grab at a time like this, it will very often get there ever again. The fact that the British have, against all rules of the art of war, interrupted their first March on Tripoli to try on another ground, saved us, Duce, and later led the British to the toughest defeats. If we now leave to pursue the British until the annihilation, the result is that later we will have a number of concerns (...)"<sup>(17)</sup>.

Meanwhile, in late afternoon of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the meeting had taken place between Bastico and Rommel. Since the latter had carried his tactical Command to the roadhouse on the via Balbia to approximately 28 kilometers from Bardia, the top commander, arrived in Tobruk by car just beyond noon accompanied by Barbasetti, at 14:30 went on the trip. He arrived at their destination at 17:00 and found an environment "of favor".

Rommel began the exposure in terms of enthusiastic confidence about the operational possibilities that opened to the Axis, with the 8th Army's defeat ensured and its temporary inability to recover. Then it was an unrepeatable opportunity to jump ahead without hesitation, heeling the opponent and from organizing resistance to Matruh and close of El Alamein, and to focus resolutely on Cairo and the Canal. Bastico was caught off guard. Apart from the directives of the Comando Supremo that the bound hands, he himself had not even taken into consideration a thrust so deep. He tried to buy time without addressing the issue on two feet, *"the directives of the Comando Supremo -observed-don't go along with his plans. You have to stop at Sollum-Halfaya and only after Malta and when we have reorganized our forces, that we will have worn-out, to resume their march towards the East."* *"I don't know of other directives-interrupted rudely Rommel-then those of the Führer and the directives of the Führer, in this case, are identical to mine. Tobruk was keeping up the morale of the British. Without Tobruk Englishmen are destroyed. And the same success for the French, when they lost Paris"*. Bastico, annoyed, said then that no



he never gave the order to continue, whereupon Rommel, irritability, emerged from the meeting room rudely. When he returned, Bastico-that Barbasetti and Mancinelli had persuaded to discuss the topic, while reserving the decision (and that decision!) to the Comando Supremo -envisaged difficulties that undeniably opposed to operating design of the kind. An overheated, Rommel submitted a response to each objection. Most of the stocks had been swallowed by the offensive: the spoils taken at Tobruk ensured at least a month of autonomy; for secure communications between Italy and Libya to eliminate Malta: but the problem could be solved on African soil. the feeding of the troops from Tripoli and Benghazi was unsustainable: though the port of Tobruk would be reopened within a few days and it was easy to prolong the coastal transport operations; the impact of mass army ran the risk of quickly: analysis but according to hot pursuit of the remnants of the 8<sup>th</sup> army would prevent the reversal of the balance of power. In short, the game Rommel admitted it was difficult but not impossible and he felt duty-bound to do it. In part it was really convinced of what he said, was in part the high degree optimistic, partly was stubborn, partly not tolerate disagreement, especially when they believed caused by ill will or prejudice disagreement. So all of a sudden you altered again exclaiming emphatically:

“I am free on the flanks and the front. Nobody can stop me. I know that in Rome insist to make the attack on Malta. We had to do it before. Malta, moreover, bombed and guarded by the Italian Navy, it will not give us trouble. ”

Then took his cap, added: *“I’m going. If the Italians want to follow us to be my guest, otherwise stop. For me it is indifferent!”*. Of course he then agreed that a determination on could not be taken at that time, and that those present had no authority to assume either, given the size of the problem and strategic political-military. All of a sudden changed mood. Smiled at Bastico and said: *“since now I invite you to breakfast in Cairo”* <sup>(18)</sup>.

Bastico assured that the terms of the question would be exactly projected in Rome and departed without having compromised on your personal point of view. However Rommel's arguments had convinced for three quarters. The following morning he sent an account of the conversation to Rome:

“I yesterday the afternoon 22<sup>nd</sup> met General Rommel at Bardia in range of one of the current most frequent shifts his tactical command. Assisted

also my boss talks to the Chief of the G.S., among other things, examining the situation after the fall line, Rommel made the following statements: situation is favorable & never may appear in the future a similar. If you must take, and he intends to use; the Führer gave directives to conquer Egypt. He intends to clarify immediately to Rome & Berlin that question.

He considers able to conquest by means of which they already have; It doesn't matter if they are withdrawn, as already ordered, Kesselring air force; the enemy is defeated more than is necessary action of air masses. Rommel adds that logistical concerns not because now conquered warehouses there are foodstuffs, materials, fuel and ammunition Italian also-he says-I am still employable; and he finally explained that German troops have everything they need to reach the Nile, and hoped that the Italian troops will follow.

I am convinced that in spite of certain limitations of the Comando Supremo, also yesterday the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Rommel, remind him or her in that lo exaltation has placed the big victory that he holds, will not stop if-as is predictable action against Sidi Omar line, that he intends to attack by tomorrow, 24<sup>th</sup> in the event that the British troops will engage, we will be victorious.

He reiterated that some orders do not receive but also run them. I believe that future operations will limit simple Rommel aim to Sidi Barrani & Marsa Matruk intended to give other residual British troops shot and capture or destroy warehouses; troops launched nothing is predictable that he induces then to move back. Everything will happen in a very short span of time. To stop such as after-action Sidi Barrani & Marsa Matruk should give urgent categorical orders that Rommel could not in any case escape.

I believe that if Egypt under current conquest material and moral conditions of enemy forces, and regardless of political conditions that I don't know, but present difficulties, but we should not exclude. No doubt that it is second summary overall examination of the spoils which it is can do after the conquest, when vast warehouses in Tobruk, Bardia & probably Marsa Matruk logistic problem especially facilitates in foodstuffs and petrol, very little in trucking; Tobruk Harbour possession also helps solve problem.

On the other hand I must in any case prevent Rommel acts of initiative or force his hand with only German forces; If German forces will march conquers Egypt also Italian forces should propose or concur and such could be (up to maximum co-operation) *Littorio*, who was from it is Supercomando provided them with vehicles, and *Ariete & Trieste* if Rommel takes the German 15th & 21<sup>st</sup> & 90<sup>th</sup>; While XXI & X Army Corps might remain at first, just in case, to garrison the border area.

If it is Comando Supremo understanding encourage Rommel designs, every effort will be made by Supercomando to overcome logistical problem, which in any case is less simple than Rommel's appraisal, but it doesn't seem irresolvable appropriate partial troops deployments also adopting calm situation now reached there may permit”<sup>(19)</sup>.

The message is exactly the situation, the way I see it

to Bastico is exposed with clarity and the likely Rommel put initiatives well focused. Therefore every comment is unnecessary, except to underline a warning of Bastico: I do not know the political situation.

So the 23<sup>rd</sup> in Rome came, one after another, the letter of Hitler, the report of Bastico, Kesselring's communication that inclined for an advanced up to El Daba (held without excessive risk, given the shock suffered by Ritchie)<sup>(20)</sup>, but also valuable information. Had been intercepted and deciphered the appreciation of the military situation in the Libyan-Egyptian theater formulated by the American military attaché in Cairo to the war Department of the United States<sup>(21)</sup>.

According to the Leut. Col. Fellers, Axis mobile forces (DAK and XX Corps) had a total of 40,000 men and around 270 tanks (generally to 390 later this month) and could benefit from the support of a thousand aircraft (of which at least 50% efficient). The 8th Army had around five divisions, two of which are worn, and perhaps an independent Brigade; of 1,564 available tanks May 27 were 100 tanks at the front and 27 in the Delta; the lost artillery roamed on 50%; the morale of the army and the Royal Air Force was very low; the Mediterranean Fleet was impotent. And assessment continued:

“Considerations.

Rommel could attempt an invasion of Egypt after a major period of reorganization of his units, during which units the Axis could also attack Malta, in order to ensure an uninterrupted supply line from Italy and Greece.

To deal with the situation you must:

-to unify the command of the army and air force;

-reorganize the 8<sup>th</sup> Army under a new command and with new methods;

-retard and restrain the Axis forces, stop at the same time the navigation so as not to bring vital supplies to the Axis;

-sink also supplies en route to Libya.

The interruption of supplies of the Axis must be able to reach, or the Middle East will be at the complete mercy of Rommel.

Conclusion:

1<sup>st</sup> -the army was defeated mostly due to inadequacy of its leaders;

2<sup>nd</sup> -if Rommel had plans to take the Delta, now is the opportune moment;

3<sup>rd</sup> - the British must do soon in order to oppose at least a respectable resistance against the Axis forces;.

4<sup>th</sup> -to keep the Middle East, the British are replenished immediately, in order of importance, a considerable amount of bombers, tanks, artillery;

5<sup>th</sup> -an armored Corps, consisting of two armored divisions, one infantry anti-tank battalions as Corps troops, is posted in the Middle East as quickly as possible. "

At 17:25 the same 23 June, Cavallero called von Rintelen. Had first the report of Bastico, given a couple of hours before. Both knew that now even Mussolini had made his choice:

"When I took to Mussolini this letter of Hitler-recalls von Rintelen-it was to my regret a too favorable reception (...). With pride I looked and it was fire and flames for the immediate attack on Egypt and for the taking of Cairo and Alexandria. Mussolini's confidence in Hitler's strategy was so far intact" (22).

The American document, then gave the *coup de Grâce*. Or, perhaps, had silenced some consciousness. Cavallero was isolated and dissatisfied: "*the problem [of transport] Rommel didn't have -cried-but us!*". Delay still meant not to mention C 3 again until 1943 and continue in severe burden for aviation to keep Malta under pressure. The only thing to do was keep the preparation of a full enterprise-level other charge-so you can move the execution without further hitches in case if the opportunity suddenly arises.

This place, Cavallero first prepared the telegram for Bastico:

"Reply 12024/Op. According to information received from reliable source English forces collapse is much more than wait and is improperly done again which allows to consider further advance to Egypt. Duce agrees mostly thought Rommel; considers, however, that it requires some major problems interesting Mediterranean theater. To this end Duce ordered that both Chief General staff demand the 25<sup>th</sup> with air force Staff Chief" (23).

Then he presided over a meeting attended by the heads of the G.S. of the R. Marina and R. Aeronautics and von Rintelen, to try the squaring of the circle. In essence, ended with plans and hopes. First: resume full raids on Malta asking Kesselring for reinforcement, in Sicily, a fighter group and two bombers, to reach the total of three-four fighter groups Germans and Italians and six to seven bomber. Second: for the fuel oil

wait for the reply by Keitel and meanwhile draw on reserves. Thirdly, not to abandon the requirement C 3, even if necessary affect his preparations for Tobruk. In this regard, Riccardi warned that the operation would have been feasible until 10-20 September, after no longer due to the condition of the sea and weather reasons.

At 20:00 Cavallero moved to palazzo Venezia to present the results of the talks. Do you know the comment by Mussolini, however some notes of Cavallero's diary on June 24 are illuminating. At 10:25 the generals Fassi and Gandin of the Comando Supremo: *New assignment of the G.S. C 3. Movement of forces to Sicily*”, at 11:00 to Gen. Madhu: *“Possibility of operation on Bizerte”*; at 18:00 to Gen. Geloso: *“Necessity of orientation towards Tunisia.”* On 25 June the head of the G.S. General left for Derna.

Back in Marmarica. On the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup>, after sending the account of meeting with Rommel in Rome, Bastico participated in Mussolini's arrangement Kesselring that *“in any case, are left free earliest aircraft intended for the units as soon as possible to move to other theaters”*, then send a message to Mancinelli as a precaution:

In the event that there are orders of approval yesterday 22 concepts expressed by General Rommel please ask the General if he had already established very approximate & lines especially to amount of forces to employ. This question has purpose study any logistical arrangements and tactics intended to cope with any eventuality and help achieve objectives as possible. I repeat this simple study for the case to us new directives which should give rapid applications (...)”<sup>(24)</sup>.

But it was not uneventful: he feared a surge of Rommel, so sent a second dispatch for Mancinelli and for consumption of the new marshal. Had to inform the Commander of the army the contents of the telegram 31249/Op. on 21 June of Cavallero, namely the need to *“adjust”* the troops promptly Sollum-Halfaya and the opportunity to resume Giarabub<sup>(25)</sup>.

Rommel had quickly, and with reason. Made a quick calculation supposedly opposing forces, had drawn the conclusion that he could attack with what at the time immediately on hand. The enemy seemed to have formed from the 5th Indian Brigade into a stronghold by Sollum at Halfaya; the remainder of the 10th Indian Division at Sidi Omar, of the 7th Armored Division stationed between Sidi Omar and Fort Maddalena and the remnants of the 5th Indian Division in the latter locality. Until then no aggressive attitude from

British side. The 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa seemed to be deployed on the positions of Bug Bug.

The Italian-German army was now concentrated on the via Balbia (the infantry) and at Trigh el Abd (mobile forces). Not that it was complete. The X Corps was at Bir Sciafsciuf with the *Brescia* (20<sup>th</sup> infantry and 1<sup>st</sup> Quick artillery), the *Pavia* (I/27<sup>th</sup> and II/28<sup>th</sup> infantry and 26<sup>th</sup> artillery), the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and XLIX 105/28 group<sup>(26)</sup>. Further West, at Sidi Bu Amud, the XXI Corps with the *Sabratha* (a battalion and 3<sup>rd</sup> Quick) and *Trento* (two battalions of 61<sup>st</sup> and two of 62<sup>nd</sup> infantry and 46<sup>th</sup> artillery), the 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and a Group of 105/28. The transfer was in progress on civilian and military vehicles, but in considerable disarray stemming largely from the succession of orders on the drum. “*On the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> - Gen. Lombardi wrote -clogging on the Tobruk-Bardia reached insurmountable limits. Units of all kinds moved on the same route, supplemented and sometimes overrunning on three or four rows*”<sup>(27)</sup>. To the South, on the Trigh el Abd, followed the 90<sup>th</sup> Light in the area of Bir Gibni, the DAK at Gabr Meliha and XX Corps at Gabr Saleh.

The orders issued during the morning guided X Corps coming up to Capuzzo, with the right northeast of Sidi Omar; XXI Corps North of Capuzzo; the mass of maneuver over the border from the South, bypassing Sidi Omar positions with a device similar to that put in place on 26 May to turn Bir Hakeim. The attack fell on a emptiness. The enemy reaction was anything except, at times, a lively activity of artillery. Numerous signs that they retreated from border positions.

In the early hours of the 24<sup>th</sup> Rommel received a communication of von Rintelen: “*The Duce endorses the intention of the Panzerarmee to chase the enemy in Egypt. Gen. Cavallero will arrive in Africa on 25 June on behalf of the Duce, bringing new directives. Due to recovery of Malta the situation of maritime transport is difficult, so transfer of Luftwaffe units in Sicily it is essential to ensure your supplies, as Malta will be under pressure (...)*”. Taking a good idea of the message, rushed to issue new regulations.

At 04:00 Navarini received a terse phonogram: “*probably the enemy retreats. XXI Corps pursue the enemy through Sollum until Bugs Bugs*” and four hours later: “*the enemy retreats. Follow closely the objectives assigned. Open as soon as the supplies.* ”

Navarini had managed to motorize some units, due to motor vehicles received from Intendenza N. A. and prey booty. All in all, could count on four battalions of *Trento*, the two of 7<sup>th</sup>

Bersaglieri and IV anti-tank grenadier battalion as infantry, and 46<sup>th</sup> artillery, 30 Quick and III/24<sup>th</sup> of 105/28 as artillery. With these units, the “Navarini pursuit group” forwarded along the coastline, leaving the *Sabratha* reunited as soon as possible between Bardia and Capuzzo. At 16:30 the 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, in vanguard, reached Bug Bug; at 20:00 resumed the movement on Sidi el Barrani, recognized by the enemy, and vacated by the occupied a few hour later.

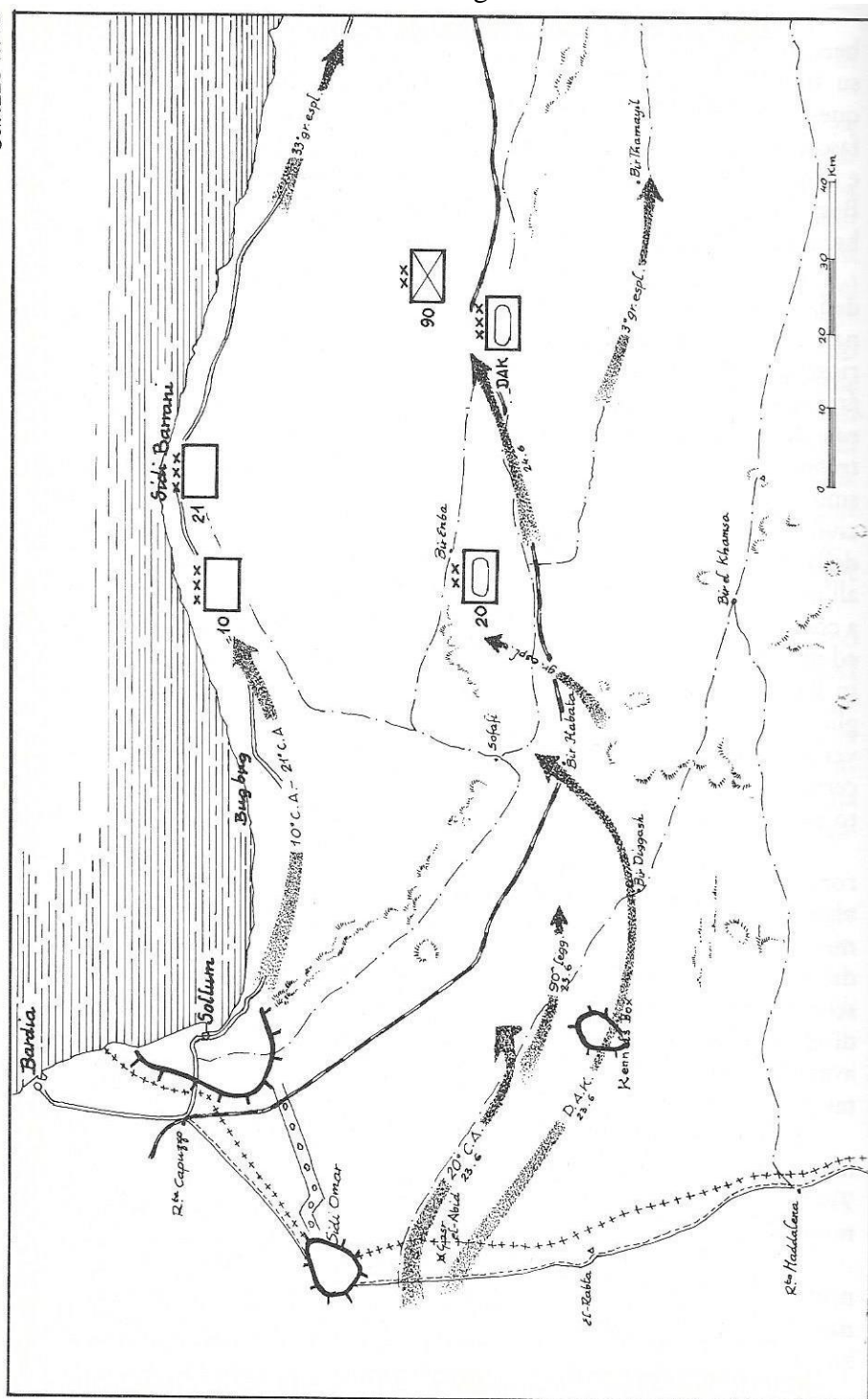
Gioda had arrived at the border with three battalions of the *Brescia*, two of *Pavia* and two 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, as well as all divisional and Corps artillery. “*In my opinion - he wrote to Comando Superiore on the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup> - I believe that in the current operational situation favorable for us, will suffice for the X Corps's seven battalions and 100 artillery pieces available, and also not to make this too heavy for any upcoming movements*”<sup>(28)</sup>. It was pure optimism. Having had to send back the evening of 23<sup>rd</sup>, thirty civilian vehicles (between trucks and trailers) which had carried to Tobruk elements of the *Littorio* and two truck sections of temporary reinforcement, Gioda received the order to follow as soon as XXI Corps managed barely constitute a column with the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, a battalion of *Pavia* and one of *Brescia*, and the artillery. Everything else had to concentrate in Bardia, waiting for further transport to the East. The 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, party in the afternoon, at dusk, he stopped a Bug Bug. The enemy seemed to stay to defend the entrenched camp of Marsa Matruh. Responded with intense aerial bombardment.

To the South, the 90th Light and the DAK, with 50 remaining tanks, continued their advance following the movement direction of the railway. Reaching Bir Misheifa, went down into the coastal strip and supplied abundantly in a large fuel depot abandoned by the enemy in the area of Bir Enba. On the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup> Germans recon Bns who proceeded on wide forehead, found themselves about seventy kilometers from Matruh. Although the movement had practically not encountered obstacles, apart from those presented by the terrain, yet it was done brilliantly.

The XX Corps stopped in the area of Bir Enba, rather too shabby: the *Ariete* remained with 600 Bersaglieri, 10 tanks and 15 field guns; the *Trieste* with 1,500 men, 4 tanks and 24 field guns; the *Littorio* with 1,000 men, 30 tanks and 11 field guns (sketch No. 46).

The most satisfying note of the day was the further capture of significant quantities of materials, supplies and fuel, although the enemy had proceeded to clear and destroy numerous warehouses and depots.

LA SITUAZIONE LA SERA DEL 24 GIUGNO





The border then was landscape that usually appears in the eyes of the winner. Anywhere, as far as the eye can see, the signs of defeat and disarray. Groups and columns of prisoners, on foot and in trucks, heading West; wheeled and armored vehicles torched, untracked tanks, piles of material intact, mounds of cans and broken boxes, artillery pieces in excellent condition or semi-destroyed, vehicles overturned, abandoned equipment.

As you know, the device of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army a front-line from Matruh to Bir el Gellaz, held by the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, by 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division and the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored, along the track for Siwa. the entrenched camp of Matruh, defended by the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division and French units, which provided support to the above-mentioned line wing; a second line west of Matruh, along Gerawla-Bir Khalda, manned by the remains of the British 50<sup>th</sup> Division and the 1st Armored (sketch No. 47).

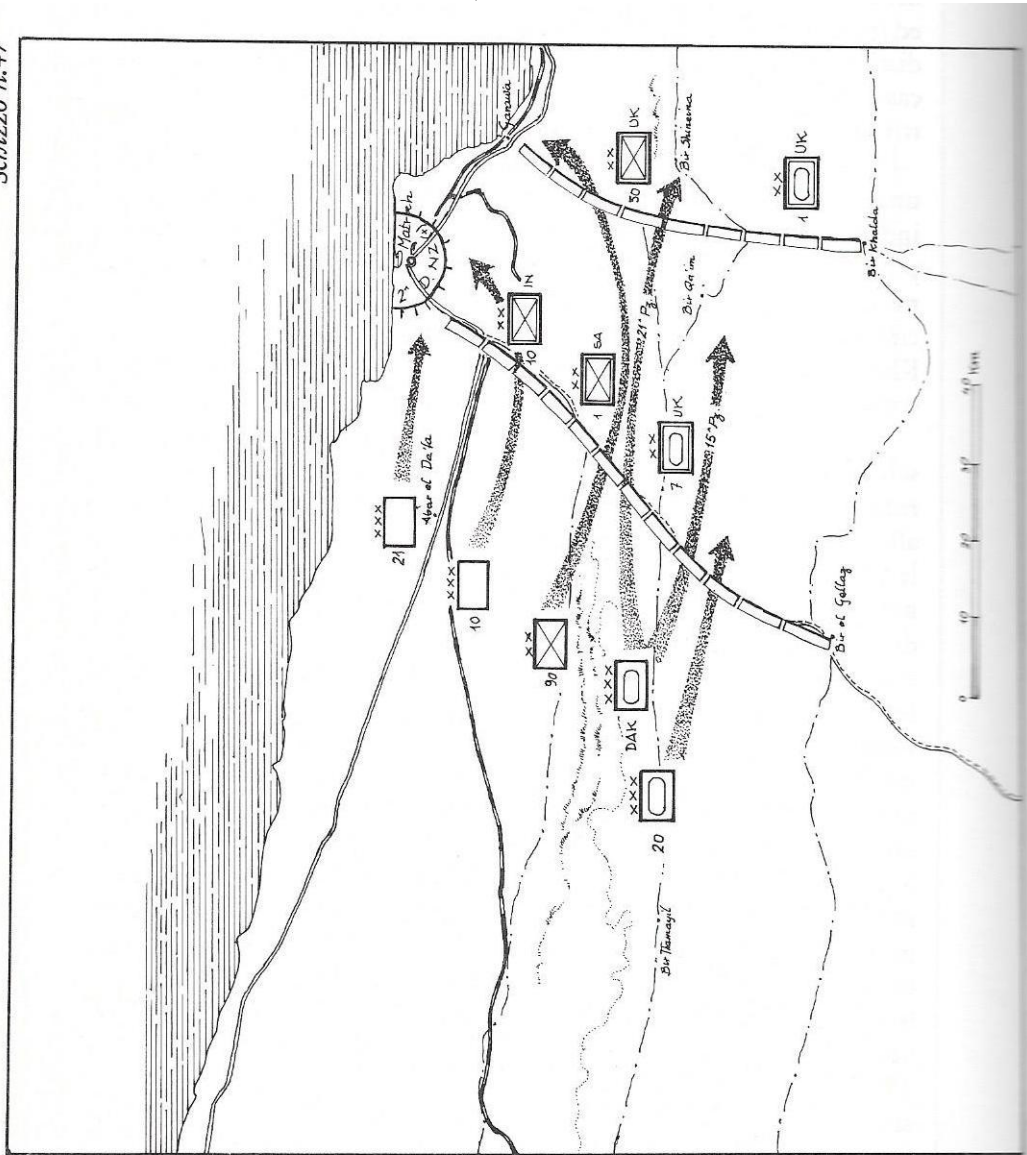
The orders given to Rommel the 24<sup>th</sup> aimed to accomplish the deployment for the undermining of these locations: the XXI Corps on the coastal road for about thirty kilometers west of the city; the X at the same height, but South of the road; even further South, in order, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, the DAK (at the foot of the embankment) and the XX Corps (on the embankment). The artillery of the army was to stay in the Center with possibility of intervention on any front. In essence, a complex linear, parallel to the Matruh-Siwa roadway. The move was based on a violent action South of Matruh, to wipe out or at least reject East the British armored forces and keep them any disruptive action against the assault on the entrenched camp. The operation, scheduled for the afternoon of the 26<sup>th</sup>, had to be held with the general South-East direction. After the track to Siwa, the X Corps had to bend northwards to invest the southern front of the fort, and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light enveloping action develop from the South until reaching Gerawla and cut communications from the East. The DAK, meanwhile, had to make a pincer movement to isolate and destroy the enemy forces on the embankment: the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* at Bir Shineina, would create the desired isolation while 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* would come in a straight line south of Bir Qaim. The XX Corp-without the *Littorio*, remained behind waiting for refueling and passed into the Reserve Corps-was initially cover the right of DAK, then support 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*. Protection against southern provenances was entrusted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn.

Expected movements took place in the 25<sup>th</sup> regularly, although the difficulties of route and supply manifested the most serious

The design of Rommel's maneuver to Matruh and the supposed British deployment (24 June)

IL DISEGNO DI MANOVRA DI ROMMEL A MATRUH  
ED IL SUPPOSTO SCHIERAMENTO BRITANNICO  
(24 giugno)

Schizzo n. 47



expected, especially for XX Corps. Very active and continued harassing raids of the *Desert Air Force*, and began to pick up Italian fighter effectiveness, which gradually moved on more advanced fields of Marmarica.

That day, at 17:45, Cavallero, Fougier and von Rintelen arrived at the airfield of Derna. *"They were all cheerful and full of euphoria-had to remember Bastico afterwards-; Indeed, just dropped Fougier from aircraft stopped to talk to some of my command officers and said, with an air of confidence a big secret, which was in preparation for a massive action against Malta."* The group went straight into town for the planned meeting. From Italian side was attended by Cavallero, Bastico, Marchesi, Barbasetti and Leut. Col. Montezemolo, arrived with the head of the G.S.G.. From the German side, Kesselring and Weichold. Kesselring was the first to speak and his preamble was simple and bitter: to take Malta headlong needed six fighter groups and likewise bomber; they had them in Sicily and, since it was not possible-against his will-to reduce support to Rommel, had to temporarily suspend shipping supplies to Libya. Then explained and vented. Was convinced of the need to destroy the remaining forces of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, so much so that Tobruk had even prompted Rommel to be the impossible to prevent the retreat of Ritchie. Unfortunately, this goal was not achieved and the enemy was openly favor without even oppose serious resistance. It stemmed from a enemy retreat and more improved his own position, on the other hand, just the ease of progression could blind us. Considering simply the aeronautical aspect, in order to support the German-Italian army had to move to the East, the air bases. Two hundred trucks asked Rommel and had seen them refuse, with obvious consequences: only a light portions of the *Luftwaffe* had been carried out and the use of basic formations in Greece showed insufficient, although Rommel minimized the problem, saying that it was enough to get close to El Alamein-about 180 kilometers, not difficult to overcome-to deprive the opponent of his airfields.

On balance, Kesselring continued, the number of losses of the *Desert Air Force*, it was necessary to calculate to face about 600 aircraft with just 120 or 130 planes, between Italians and Germans, whose one half not usable as too far back. Being able to perform full deployment, was convinced to make it up to El Alamein-as had assured Hitler-but not beyond. Paused, and then added in a serious tone: *"Of this judgment I feel*

*answerable to history.*" On the other hand, from the positions of El Alamein aerial capabilities against the heart of Egypt were very high. Ultimately, should absolutely be wary of an all out advance; If being ordered would have obeyed, but fearing that the end of the campaign. However, commented, the operation *Hercules* collapses for three quarters.

Cavallero, according to the recollections of Bastico, listening and nodding head. When Kesselring had finished speaking, there was a moment of silence "*as if everyone present had withheld their breath*". Cavallero wanted to put in particular Malta's problem, but seems to have done without conviction, knowing that in Rome and Berlin had already been shelved the project:

"Malta-he said-always disturbs our sleep and no one takes away from that until we possess that island alive in the middle of the Mediterranean, we won't be able to do anything good and decisive."

Kesselring would synthesize operational hypotheses and did so in simple and clear terms:

"The first case: the advance continues and eight or ten days the term [i.e. until El Alamein]; at this time there is nothing to do in Malta. Second case: the advance stops [border positions]; reclaim the action on Malta, you give back to the of course supplies and then takes back the advance with the supplies received.

The first case is the only possible because (...) we are too weak to fight in two parts. I have the distinct feeling that continuing the advance [over El Alamein] will compromise all the success of the battle."

Apart from this, he did not know how to go about transferring the *Luftwaffe* units. Cavallero was, at least in this respect, less pessimistic. First made sure that the supplies would be taken up with convoys of three ships headed to Benghazi and air transport, to pull ahead waiting to resume the neutralizing Malta, which had to implement within three weeks. Then he read what the S.I.M had intercepted from ten communications. American Col. Fellers and observed that, after Matruh, was also likely to collapse everything. Intervened then Weichold-note the absence of a qualified representative of the R. Marina-finding satisfactory solution of direct steamers to Benghazi, and also soon to Tobruk, but suggested that a division of Italian cruisers were deployed to Suda on the island of Crete. So ended the meeting without any decisions. It was not possible a contact with Rommel because he was inspecting the around advanced lines.

How about midnight Mancinelli confirm the hearsay in the afternoon: "*Marshal Rommel's next goal will be Cairo instead of Alexandria*"<sup>(29)</sup>, conversation with Kesselring had reinforced the decisions already sketched with Mussolini, so on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> Cavallero gave to Bastico the formal directives of the Comando Supremo, which concluded:

“4. Accordingly the Duce orders:

a) strive for first time to occupy the bulk of the forces between the Arab Gulf and the Qattara depression; This position must represent the starting point for any further action;

b) to this end, eliminate first fortified zones in the area Matruh-Baggush, annihilating enemy forces deployed on the position of Marsa Matruh and rather than proceed leaving behind these squares not yet eliminated;

c) make further progress in force beyond the narrows indicated in a) in a particular the Mediterranean situation.

5. As mentioned above, it should be borne in mind that the enemy can rapidly strengthen its air deployment; It is therefore essential to make every effort to bring promptly first the deployment of German and Italian air forces.

6. As soon as possible, shall provide for the occupation of the oases of Siwa and Jaghbub”<sup>(30)</sup>.

And interesting to observe the positions of the main characters up to this point. Rommel intended to settle the game and was no mystery to arrive at Cairo. Hitler, not at all convinced about the Malta endeavor, he openly supported and Mussolini had willingly left carried away by enthusiasm and by the prospect of arriving in Egypt as Conqueror. Kesselring was preceded by strong preference towards the immediate beginning of operation *Hercules* that unfortunately, given the circumstances, it was best to continue until El Alamein, which left little hope of implementing the occupation of Malta in the near future. Cavallero maintained much to Malta, but knew that the orientation of Hitler and Mussolini to Rommel was now irreversible, therefore accepted the thesis of Kesselring: Yes to advance, but until El Alamein; then it would be thought to Malta.

Also aligned Weichold, whereas transfer to Crete by Italian naval forces would help to solve the problem of the safety of convoys, and hoping that the situation would help to convince the OKW to increase deliveries of fuel oil to Italy. Riccardi was missing, but had he been present he would have said that the carriage of June were the lowest since the beginning of the war (32,327 tons landed in Libya, not counting 9,000 tons sunk by torpedo planes

based in Malta), which convoys used fuel oil to battleships and cruisers of the fleet and that concerned the R. Marina was now to be seen only in the light of the fuel available.

Bastico finally, having clear ideas on the format discussions with Rommel, was limited to worry about logistics, which he knew was difficult solve.

A brief comment on this picture. Kesselring's thesis, that much was pushing up to El Alamein, also views the possibility offentisi the Axis air forces, is without doubt justified, but Kesselring intended before being allowed an influx of *Luftwaffe* units, i.e. it was necessary to overcome the difficulties of land transport in Africa, task and responsibility of Italy. The accession of Cavallero to this line of thinking was also acceptable, provided of course that he had not only polishes the solution in mind and firm determination to set it in place, but also a chance to give it concrete form. Now, however, it does not seem that things were just so. To move into the Eastern Mediterranean strategic centre of gravity, the R Marina needed oil and this was supplied by Germany; to make and escort convoys, ditto; to prevent raids from Malta against objectives in the peninsula, the Islands and the sea was a reinforcement of aviation and this also depended on Germany; to keep pressure on Malta, ditto; to perform the operation C3 there was need of the German aid. In short, whatever decision you would take, it should be first agreed to with the OKW or even with Hitler.

On the formal level, then, the written directives repeated reference to Mussolini: "...the Duce's orders" and "by order of the Duce". It is obvious the intent of Cavallero to be firm with Rommel from Mussolini and also, probably, to force the latter not later contradict himself. However, we must say so frankly, the implied waiver to take and enforce the appropriate responsibility of their Office arouses bewilderment and regret.

On 26 June a group of military leaders traveled to the headquarters of the tactical Command of the German-Italian army. Rommel was not yet in place. "*He arrived after an hour-remembered-white dust Bastico and frowning. No compliments to anyone; to the contrary, Kesselring, not addressed even the word*"<sup>(31)</sup>. Just entered the roadhouse, Rommel began an exhibition without prologue: "*we are on the march and we approach the entrenched camp of Marsa Matruh. I know it will be a hard nut to crack. It is a base*

*from the perimeter of about 20 km and 4 deep (...). In Marsa Matruh there is material to feed an entire army. "*

*"And after Marsa Matruh?" asked Cavallero.*

*"Go ahead right where it will be possible," said Rommel dryly -. I have little petrol and very little water, but in this climate of success don't ask soldiers to drink nor to eat. Just go ahead."* Then he turned to Bastico: *"even the Italian soldiers that I had my orders were magnificent. On the field there was no difference between them and the Germans. Now there's no reason to stop. What remained back should come forward as soon as they will have the opportunity and the means"*. Then moved the discourse onto aviation. The Royal Air Force was raging, but soon would be deprived of all airports which currently received. The purpose of the action was formed by the rapid achievement of close to El Alamein, *"the further goal is the Nile both to eliminate Alexandria, and to go to Cairo."*

Cavallero now intervened to point out that the goal of the Cairo strategically was intended as Cairo-Suez. Knowing the directions he had in his pocket amazed this revival. Maybe it would have been more appropriate to say that the ' goal ' was again discussed in due time.

Rommel proceeded to Kesselring, *"I need an intervention by the Führer because I urgently send fresh troops and armored units"*, but Kesselring calmed the request: there was too many irons in the fire everywhere, then at least temporarily was hard to hope for something substantial; He himself had received only a few new *Stuka*. While thriving discussion, contradictory news arrived of the battle taking place in Matruh. It was reported, all of a sudden, that South of the Italian-German deployment had been infiltrated, some of which could have alarming consequences, but Rommel is not left impressed and continued: the enemy had no other forces that those under his hand, with which he would be able to look at eighty miles of the Nile. *"For now-I affirm – to arrive at El Alamein, but other objectives; Alexandria, Cairo, Nile. If the army is able to overcome the narrow of Alamein, what I believe, on 30 June will be in Cairo"*. Then, sketching a smile, he added: *"I'll be waiting there. We can speak more comfortably"*.

Bastico, according to his memoirs, listened in silence this kind of sermon and occasionally addressed looks awestruck to Cavallero and Kesselring *"which had assumed an attitude of impenetrable, by statue. No muscle of their faces moved. "* At the end of the monologue of Rommel, Cavallero took aside Bastico and asked an opinion

on rough operating outline and supported with so much emphasis from new field marshal.

“*New opinions, not one,*” said the top-commander. My opinion you know already and I insist on that. The rest even Rommel knows. We must stand with the bulk of the forces on the embankment of the Halfaya, create there our defenses and rehearsing to actually. We can occupy Sidi Barrani and Marsa Matruh, constituting at Giarabub a significant strong protection for the far right flank and make offensive show from this location with armored units. When our forces will be completely rearranged you can attack again and invest El Alamein.

But now it's too late to change the program. Rommel's plan rests on a concept so optimistic of the situation which does not discuss account. “*Trust in God!*”.

Cavallero “not breathing” and Kesselring just quit the post for movement of *Luftwaffe* units, achieving both Rommel and Cavallero the promise of any commitment in this respect. “*After that I read for General von Rintelen in German the directives n. 31300 of the Comando Supremo. General Bastico gives copy to Rommel*” in his written diary Cavallero, at the end of conversation <sup>(32)</sup>.

There is no denying the absurdity of such an attitude. Rommel announced that predict the conquest of Cairo or Alexandria in next *four* days and Cavallero, who delivers the Duce's *order* of making further progress in force beyond the indicated defilade [El Alamein] the situation, especially Mediterranean says not a syllable! Don't you understand what you should arouse spirit of Cavallero. Not having brought with him, to Africa, directives signed personally by Mussolini, why hurry to draft on the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup> for delivery under your signature-order-even to Bastico at 09:00 of the 26<sup>th</sup> <sup>(33)</sup>, before you even heard Rommel's operational program? and why keep them and present them to Rommel at the end of the meeting of Sidi el Barrani, knowing that these proposed instead to arrive in Cairo, or at least in Alexandria, in four days? But let's see what Mussolini referred to that evening:

“(…) From first summary examination showed that logistic situation in the judgment of the Top Commander Armed Forces N.A. allows advanced despite continued serious difficulties (...) that appear to be overcome, however.

(…) Having said that, I must inform you, Duce, which I found here delicate situation for profound disagreement between Rommel and Kesselring, dissent at personal background, which had led to a judgment of Kesselring situation rather pessimistic even as far as the Mediterranean. Having been able to determine the psychological basis of this disagreement I failed yesterday to correct the Kesselring orientation so that the dissent has



have been made this morning in the encounter with Rommel. As regards African theater mattered ensure close coordination with air force advanced with those ground forces. Also there was disagreement on this point that it was possible to compose according to Your directives that I informed SuperASI & shows to Kesselring, Rommel and present Bastico and Fougier, reaching perfect understanding on them.

At a glance:

1. Thoroughly successful exploitation so far obtained;
2. Continue advancing without wasting time with as much as possible forces together to reach as the first goal between the Gulf Arabs and the Qattara depression, after the Elimination of defenses of Marsa Matruh and Baggush. This line will serve as a basis for further advanced;
3. (...);
4. Eastern Mediterranean situation underlying the problem throughout; OBS & Superaereo resume ASAP pressure on Malta; Meanwhile transport through the Mediterranean will continue to the extent and with the means that have been determined to Rome and of which I gave here news.

(...) Marsa Matruh position attack takes place today afternoon. We will have news tomorrow”<sup>(34)</sup>.

The "*perfect understanding*" does not appear at all that if three communications reveal finally the change of opinion by Cavallero. Just returned to Derna, telegraphed to the Gen. Magli, of the Comando Supremo, the no impediment to Mussolini coming to Africa<sup>(35)</sup> and the next morning Mussolini still envisioning an advance an opportunity to impart the rules about the behavior of Italian Commands to the population "*and possibly to Egyptian authorities*"<sup>(36)</sup>. Then he stared at the new directives, always the Duce to Bastico:

"The continuation of operations by starting the Gulf Arabs-El Qattara, after which the opposing forces were beaten once again contrasting our advanced, is designed as follows:

1. objective of the Suez Canal, aiming at Suez and Ismailia; from Ismailia, ASAP, on Port Said. Purposes: blocking the canal and to prevent influx of reinforcements from the Middle East;
2. Assumption of this advanced is that both ensured the occupation of Cairo, also facing South (including airports);
3. Block directions from Alexandria to secure from that direction since you cannot occupy the fort;
4. Secure the rear against possible landings by sea keeping manned the main points of the coast and keeping on hand a sufficient force to rush to any threatened points;
5. The Duce predicts that in the advanced Italian and German forces are also represented.

Rules for the conduct of military commands to the authorities and people of Egypt will be released soon”<sup>(37)</sup>.

In other words, complete adherence to the operating design of Rommel, more or less regardless of the Mediterranean, Malta and fuel oil. Talk about unjustified about-face maybe is hyper-critical region, but that it had been an emotional abandonment to a flattering vision of triumphal entrance resounding in Alexandria and Cairo is undeniable: too tempting were the calculation of distances on the map and the illusion that the enemy had been hopelessly beaten. We will return to his part at this crucial moment, but in the meantime the first disappointment came from the OKW. Requests for 40,000 tons of fuel oil for the R. Marina and 10,000 tons of fuel for the R. Aeronautics could not be answered. Even the *Kriegsmarine* and the *Luftwaffe* were insufficiently powered, so "*Germanic part all the possibilities of help are exhausted. There remains therefore only the Romanian supply, which measure is not for me to look after for you*" concluded Keitel <sup>(38)</sup>. It was, in essence, make do with what existed.

In those days the attention of Cavallero turned with a particular commitment to the restoration of the efficiency of the port of Tobruk, but he also found ways to define an important dispute. An agreement was needed on its war booty. The agreement with the OKW decided that all material captured in Russia were considered of German property and that taken in Africa of Italian property. However it was agreed that the troops could use weapons and materials immediately to urgent need for combat, except for subsequent delivery to bodies in charge. According to these agreements, in North Africa, the management of warehouses and depots captured was to be assumed by the Intendenza N.A., which would have proceeded without delay to settle the distribution to Italian and German large units <sup>(39)</sup>.

On June 29 Matruh fell. That morning we had another high-level meeting at Fonte Mara (West of Derna), tactical headquarters of the Comando Superiore. Kesselring reported that Rommel was to spend two days at the reordering of forces, especially those armored, and then attack the defilade of El Alamein, gravitating with stress on the left instead of the right. Break through at El Alamein (and on this hovered a unanimous certainty), the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet and the *Fliegerführer* was battering the retreating enemy troops. Added more optimistically, a few days before, that with reinforcements received hoped to ensure an increased protection to convoys. In addition, thanks to a new group, had provided transport to bring 800-1,000 men per day to Sidi el Barrani or later, while the Italians S.82 would have provided for Italian personnel.

In relation to what is represented by Kesselring, Cavallero provided the drafting of directives about the behavior towards the Egypt-rather obvious-and on the use of aviation<sup>(40)</sup>.

At 19:45, Mussolini arrived at Derna.

## 2. THE BRITISH OPERATING PROBLEM

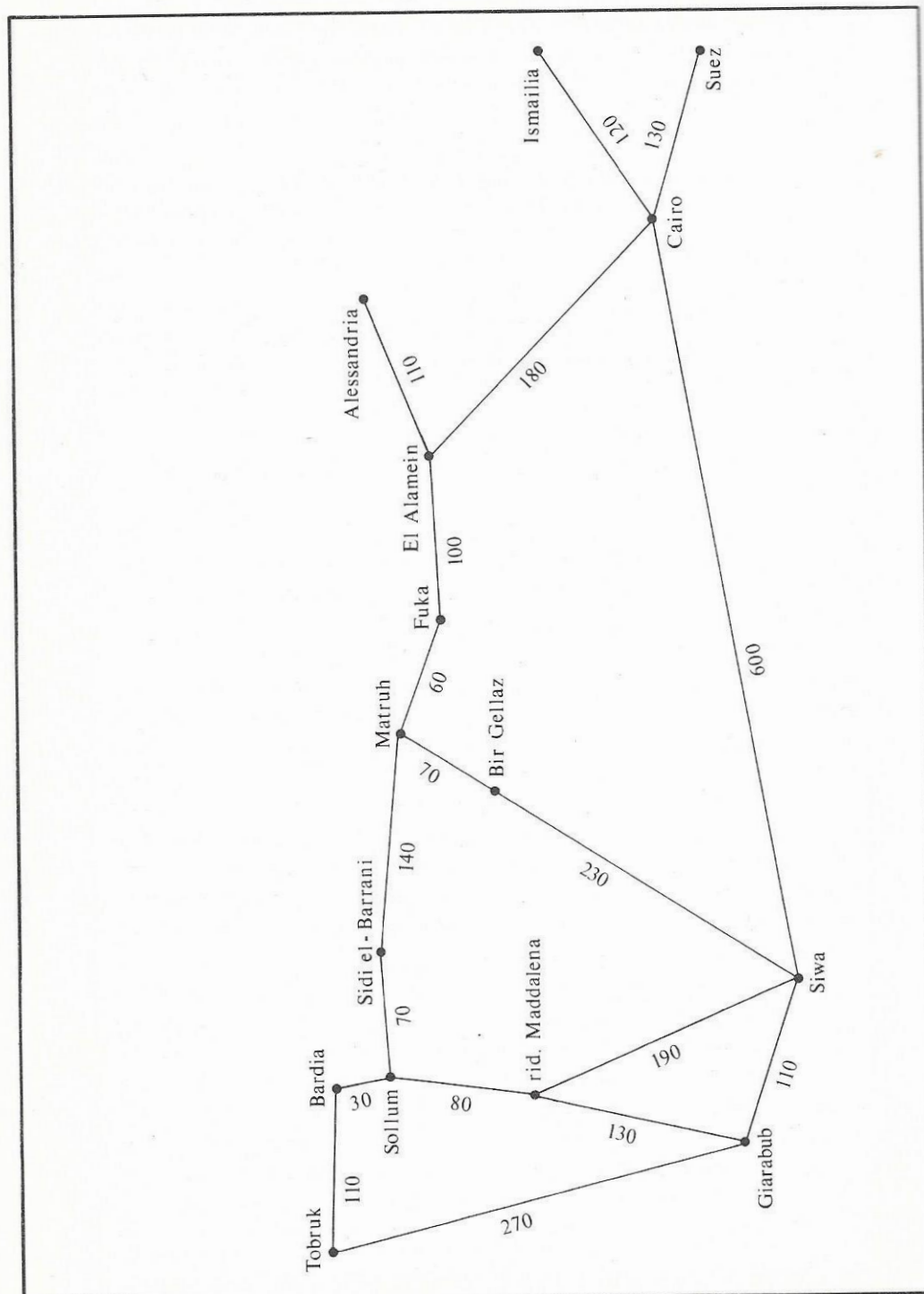
Shortly before midnight on 20 June, Ritchie warned Auchinleck who was now marked the fate of Tobruk and that, given the magnitude of the war booty, Rommel might have been able to resume immediately the advance eastwards. On the other hand, the limited availability of armored units could not hope for a prolonged defense of the frontier line, then *"I think we can only buy time with a delaying maneuver"* and requested the abandonment of border locations to obtain space forthwith.

Things were definitely compromised for the square was clear; in fact at 08:00 the following morning came the news to the army that headquarters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Africa Division was overwhelmed. At this point, Ritchie resolved to notify the decisions taken in Cairo to deal with the events. He defended Matruh with the New Zealand Division in arrival from Syria, and with a brigade of Indian 5th Division; the British 50th Division deployed on the left of the entrenched camp the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division at Maaten Baggush and the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division to the rear, with a part at the narrows of El Alamein. The armored divisions, in the course of reorganization, it would be placed to the East of the latter locations. *"In my opinion and according to Gott – he added- at this time the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division is not in condition for a serious fight and needing some time to regroup"*<sup>(41)</sup>.

Given these prospects, the Defense Committee of the Middle East broadcast to London and to Washington a long and detailed examination of the situation. The ratio of the opposing forces appeared favorable in aircraft<sup>(42)</sup>, but just not on the ground. Rommel had gained superiority in all areas and he was abundantly stocked with transportation. On the other hand, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had about three and a half divisions with little artillery; three tank regiments, two of them poorly trained and the other a mixture; two motorized brigades and four regiments of armored cars. The New Zealand Division was arriving at Matruh.

Distance in Kilometers in Libya by Air

DISTANZE CHILOMETRICHE IN LINEA D'ARIA



The plan provided for the defense of the frontier was based on the strength of a number of *boxes*, i.e. Brigadier strongholds, and ready for reactivity a great armored reserve. Since this did not exist, the strongpoints could be eliminated one after the other. To the East of the border there were natural or artificial obstacles which lay a defensive organization to Matruh. Here was prepared an entrenched camp to an infantry division and, further South, a location, Sidi Hamza, designed but not ready. Between the two locations were several minefields. It is true that even at this line was considered necessary a strong armored reserve, however, in partial defect; you could resort to infantry fire to activate the prohibitive value of minefields. On the other hand, even knowing the speed of movement of Rommel, between Sollum and Matruh as there were still more than 200 miles of desert, which represented a significant obstacle to advanced, the more that could be easily added by the intervention of the *Desert Air Force*. In essence, it seemed logical to hold the enemy back at the border with troops moving entirely to ensure the withdrawal of the bulk of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army on Matruh and to enable the preparation of a strike force able to regain the initiative.

With this in mind, the orders were first drafted the conservation of border positions as long as possible with mechanized forces, well equipped with artillery, in order to impose the maximum stopping time of Italian-German columns, as well as keep up to the advanced landing strips and airfields West of Matruh. This task would be facilitated by an intense activity of the *Desert Air Force* and operation of demolition across the border strip. As regards the position of Matruh, representing the collecting point for the 8<sup>th</sup> Army in retreat, it should also include the area south of the entrenched camp. Provisions in part concerned the transfer of each store and warehouse to the East of Matruh and rapid organization of a shock force <sup>(43)</sup>.

Of course-evaluation-continued the retreat to Matruh involved problems should not be underestimated. Axis air formations would have received new and more chances to attack on the Delta, on the Suez Canal and into the Red Sea area and, on the other hand, the *Royal Air Force* would see reduced its range in the Mediterranean and on the Libyan ports. The Italian fleet would have enjoyed freedom of maneuver in the Central Mediterranean and penetration in to the Eastern basin, while the Mediterranean Fleet would no longer be able to escort a convoy to Malta. Finally,

also in the political field, there was the possibility of negative consequences, such as troubles in Egypt and a change in the stance of Turkish.

In the early afternoon of June 21, in Washington, Churchill was in the study with Pres. Roosevelt and Gen. Brooke, when Gen. Marshall entered and gave the President a telegram. Roosevelt read it, and then passed it on to Churchill without a word: "*Tobruk surrendered*—said the dispatch—*25,000 men have fallen prisoners*". The news seemed so unbelievable that Gen. Ismay was sent to call London, however a few minutes later he returned with a second telegram. Was from Adm. Harwood and came from Alexandria:

“Tobruk fell and the situation has so deteriorated that Alexandria can be obviously attacked by aircraft in the near future; in view of the imminent full moon period, sending all Eastern Mediterranean fleet ships South of the Suez Canal to wait for events. Trust to release the *Queen Elizabeth* from the dock at the end of this week”<sup>(44)</sup>.

Roosevelt showed much understanding for the disastrous event and asked how America could be helpful. Churchill responded. “*Give us all Sherman tanks that you can and send them to the Middle East as soon as possible.*” Gen. Marshall promised then that would have to remove the 300 *Shermans* from American armored divisions (the first products) and a hundred self-propelled 105s for the 8th Army.

In the evening came the dispatch of the Defense Committee of the Middle East. At 23:30 Roosevelt again met with three American Chiefs of staff and Churchill with Gens. Dill, Brooke and Ismay to study the situation and the intentions of the commanders in Chief of the Middle East. Churchill was not at all satisfied and, having regard to the availability of the United States to send substantial air and land forces and especially the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division in that theater of operations, hastened to meet Auchinleck:

“1. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Mar. Dill and I hope strongly that stiff resistance is put forward on the Sollum border. Information details have highlighted the effort which the enemy has been subjected. Very significant reinforcements are on their way. A week earned can be decisive. We do not know exactly when the New Zealand Division, but we predicted that this could happen at the end of the month. The 8th Armored and 44th Infantry are on their way and are going to arrive. We agree with General Smuts that you can draw freely on the 9th and 10th armies, since the danger from the North is more remote. You can therefore make vigorous attacks with three divisions currently to the East of the Canal.

2. I was naturally disconcerted by your news; It may be that

We must fall back on the positions where we were 18 months ago, and that we need to redo all the work done in this period. Anyway I don't think the Delta's defense cannot really be guaranteed and I hope that nobody will let influence by spectacular shots that the enemy has inflicted. I am sure that with your perseverance, decisiveness and usual ability to address the risk, you can restore the situation, especially considering the arrival of massive reinforcements.

3. Here, in Washington, the President has been deeply shaken by what happened; He and other high authorities of the United States appear spontaneously willing to lend us the greatest help. Allow me to inform you that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division of the United States, especially trained for war in the desert in California, will depart for the Suez Canal toward July 5 and is expected to arrive in August. There is no need for send back to India, as expected, the Indian Division and the Indian armored brigade. We are also taking other measures, as well as those shown in the telegram of the chiefs of staff, to redirect to the Libyan theatre aircraft allocated to India (...). I told the Chief of the G.S. of the Air Force to send his deliveries including the four groups of *Halifax*, unless you have already done so.

4. The main thing now is to inspire all your troops a determination to resist and fight and not to accept the abnormal situation created by the handful of Rommel's heavy tanks. Let all your authorized personnel to do their best in these critical days. Her Majesty's Government is so ready to share your responsibilities in putting forward the more energetic and bold resistance” <sup>(45)</sup>.

In London the views of commanders in Chief in the Middle East was poorly appreciated. The Deputy Prime Minister, Attlee, said at midnight that same June 21, meaning that generally speaking the War Cabinet approved the operating address, however, in his view, had not been given sufficient value to the difficulties that the opponent would be met if forced to mount an attack against the border positions. *"If the fighting at the border were, in a simple rearguard action-Attlee stated-the entrenched camp of Matruh could be quickly overwhelmed, but if the troops for the defense of the border against a resolute and determined resistance, you could completely stop the advancing enemy, or in the worst case, buying time to put together a armored force of impact able to act offensively from Matruh"* <sup>(46)</sup>.

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Auchinleck went for the third time in ten days in command of the 8th Army. Included the reasons given by Ritchie and acknowledged that he alone had able to fully assess the need or not to retire, though *"there were serious strategic disadvantages to abandon the frontier and I did with grave reluctance - admitted later. The reason that an armored force was essential to the success of*

*the border defense positions, was also in the same way as for the field of Matruh, which, due to the trend of the coast, could easily remain isolated from a movement made on its southern flank”*<sup>(47)</sup>.

When he reached Baggush, Ritchie the illustrated map of the situation. At the border was placed Gott's 13<sup>th</sup> Corps with five armored cars regiments across the front, the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division in the Sollum -Halfaya strongholds and the 1st Armored Division Southeast of Sidi Omar. The remnants of the 50th Division were gathered at Bugs Bug. The 1st South African Division held passes of the escarpment with the 2nd Brigade, while the 3rd was on the way to El Alamein and the 1st, still in the *Kennels Box* at Sidi Hamza, was preparing to follow them. In particular, the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division consisted of the 4th Armored Brigade (two regiments with seventy tanks altogether) and the 22<sup>nd</sup> (with only one Regiment of twenty-two tanks), the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade with four battalions and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Motorized Brigade. All in all, Auchinleck contented himself. As Corbett, phoned his boss at the G.S. he remained in Cairo, Gott had received orders to "*impose the maximum delay to the enemy.*"

It should say that just that morning, *Ultra* deciphered a *Enigma* message of Kesselring to Goering, which were the decision of Kesselring and Rommel to attack the positions of Sollum, Halfaya and Maddalena on 24 June and the understanding of Rommel to bind with the infantry the frontier strongholds while the DAK would conduct a wide envelopment from the South. Kesselring had also pointed out that since 26 June would have transferred to Sicily the reinforcements granted to his part to the *Fliegerführer*, and because communications through the Mediterranean remained difficult to unscramble the *Luftwaffe* forces in preparation for subsequent operations<sup>(48)</sup>. All this made think that Rommel would have stopped for a few days after the action at the border; so he bought some validity to the idea to withdraw the bulk of 8th Army on Matruh and there prepare for battle. The fact is that the first appearance of German exploring elements at Bardia and Northwest of Sollum, Ritchie certainly authorized the withdrawal of the infantry. Then in the evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup> the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and the British 50<sup>th</sup> began to thin out their deployment and 1<sup>st</sup> South African Brigade left the *Kennels Box*.

On June 23 the retrograde movement of infantry is completed and in the evening the two brigades of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored were available to move to Matruh. Remaining in front of the Italian - German operation



only the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Motorized Brigade and the 4<sup>th</sup> South African Armored Car Regiment.

In the afternoon, meanwhile, the Defense Committee of the Middle East had responded to Attlee and the communication, rather than controversy, was repeated by Churchill:

"We realize only too well that it is desirable to hold the enemy border positions and there you will give up easily.

However, you must understand the real value of similar defense under the present circumstances. There are two main strongholds to be held by infantry and artillery with the support of an suitable armored reserve entity to deal with an onslaught of tanks enveloping the southern flank or penetrating the interval, thirty miles wide, between these static structures. We do not have the minimum of armored units necessary for that purpose. Given this, nothing can stop the enemy to isolate the strongholds and destroy them one at a time. As a result, would be insufficient troops to defend the Matruh's entrenched camp, which would be quickly overwhelmed. The Matruh requires an armored reserve equal to that necessary for the border.

We need time to reorganize an armored force of impact and at the same time, maintain our efficiency and protect Egypt. This time we can only be achieved by increasing the distance that the enemy must overcome in order to meet with the bulk of our forces. We will therefore:

a. use of the facilities and border minefields with mobile units equipped with much artillery and largely supported by air. They can delay and wear down the enemy without being surrounded and disposed of;

b. prepare an armored reserve and prepare a defensive-offensive battle at Matruh in order to block the opponent to the West of Matruh, even if they are in force.

This policy deprives the enemy of advantage of this superiority in tanks in the decisive operation that he hopes to develop at the border, and forces him to face the formidable problem to invade Egypt with the mass of troops through 120 miles of waterless territory between the border and Matruh.

A decisive battle at Matruh can be fought in better conditions for us. But as soon as we are ready for an offensive, the bulk of 8th Army will at the border.

We propose that you invite Major. Gen. Galloway, general staff, to explain the effects in strategic and tactical field of the almost total absence of obstacles to the mechanized movement in the Western desert, and the consequent freedom of maneuver granted to superior armored side, however strong in the infantry or well entrenched may be the opposite side"<sup>(49)</sup>.

The framework was appropriate, although stinging. And-it is permissible to say - it's odd that the actual and specific effect of this last paragraph was not used by friend and foe to explain *ad abundantiam*\* the

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 \*(*Latin*) for the sake of completeness

disaster of the Italian 10th army at Sidi Barrani in December 1940! Without, of course, removing any merit to Gen. O'Connor.

Auchinleck had returned to Cairo on the evening of 22. Was aware of the need for changes in the chain of command. First he appointed himself. On the morning of 23 a telegram addressed to Brooke calm and honest, worthy of a high moral stature soldier:

"The unfavorable trend of recent battle in Cyrenaica, culminating in the disastrous fall of Tobruk, leads me to ask you seriously to consider the opportunity to stay [or not] in position. I have no doubt that you are already weighing this possibility and I find it more than right, but I know that I'm aware of the effects that may result from the fighting in recent months.

I personally feel able to continue and I am confident he can turn the situation as soon as possible. However, there is no doubt that in circumstances such as the present, fresh blood and new ideas can make all the difference between success and stalemate (...). After you macerate for months, day and night, on a particular issue, it is prone to fossilize and losing originality. In this theatre the originality is essential and it is likely that a change is desirable also in this respect, regardless of any other considerations, such as the loss of prestige arising from failure, lack of luck and all other factors that affect the morale of an army.

It occurred to me that you could use Alexander, who could be here in a day or two. Personally I don't think Wilson will take over now, but would be suitable. I really thought about it, and I must share with you my thoughts" <sup>(50)</sup>.

However some heads began to fall. Rees, Commander of the 10th Indian Division, was replaced by Gen. Nichols <sup>(51)</sup>, and Messervy by Gen. Renton.

On the morning of 24 June, it was the turn of a personal letter to Churchill. Auchinleck wrote calmly, essentially for responding to the telegram sent by the *Prime Minister*. He expressed regret for the surrender of Tobruk and the rout suffered by the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and resumed the argument of the strongholds of Sollum and Sidi Omar, already mentioned in the previous dispatch. Then came to provide some details on the arrangement of the entrenched camp of Matruh. Could count on the 50<sup>th</sup> Division (two brigades), the 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions (three brigades each) and the New Zealand Division (full strength), as well as on the 1<sup>st</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Divisions and depending on the availability of tanks. The 8<sup>th</sup> Armored Division would enter online in due course and after a convenient attack training in desert. "It is my firm intention-promise-resume the offensive as soon as our armored units are strong enough to have a reasonable chance of success".

It had taken off, he continued, two divisions to the 9th Army and a third to 10th plus a Corps Command, broadcast units, two armored regiments, one medium caliber artillery, two field and two anti-tank. Without calculating the French contingent, Polish, Greek and Transjordanian, not yet equipped and trained, remained in the eastern sector of the theatre of operations two Indian divisions, an Indian armored brigade, an Indian armored car Regiment and the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division. Was aware of the risk which ran since neither Syria nor Iraq nor could be quiet; Persia on the other hand did not think that the situation in Egypt requires other infantry and armored units had no longer available on the fronts of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> armies.

Anyway, the news given him made the panorama acceptable: the US 2nd Armored Division constituted a welcome reinforcement, as well as groups of *Halifax*, and also *Grant* tanks and planes diverted from India; not having to postpone large Indian units as expected earlier, allowed to look with confidence to the problem of internal security of Iraq and Persia, particularly in areas of oil fields. As for the morale not feared downturns. Ditto for preparation for combat: you were catching up for lost time, but there was still much to be done, particularly for armored personnel carriers and artillery, without which the infantry could not be used. The needed American medium tanks were able to compete with the *Panzer* and *Crusader* armed with 2 lb pieces. Of course, if the latter had been equipped with 6 lbs. pieces, would go well anyway. About the recent setbacks, "*I accept full responsibility*" concluded Auchinleck<sup>(52)</sup>.

The letter makes no mention of two big problems in those 48 hours they discussed the mood of the Commander in Chief. The first concerned the battle positions of Matruh, another person of Ritchie. Were in some ways linked with double thread. When Ritchie had proposed to resolve the struggle on the entrenched camp of Matruh, Auchinleck had nodded and in this sense he was also expressed with the war Cabinet and with Churchill. But hiding the consequences of defeat: the latest of units in the fighting ranks of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army would be to liquefied, without any possibility of substitution; would have been the end of the campaign, of Egypt, of the Middle East; It would be the beginning of political and military upheaval, starting with possible Turkish intervention alongside the Axis. Everything would be decided only in the battle of Matruh. And Ritchie this battle would have lost, I was sure. "*Therefore-I wrote*

later-that *I could not run the risk of being pinned at Matruh*”<sup>(53)</sup>. The alternative was El Alamein, where Norrie with the headquarters of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp was already organizing resistance. The squeezed between the sea and the Qattara depression, offered better conditions for Defense, and a little bit of time still would have earned a profit of reordering the whole army, who had much need<sup>(54)</sup>, and the arrival of reinforcements. Instead, Rommel would have seen stretch his axis supplies terribly and vacate.

Apart from that it was necessary to address the problem of the Commander, delicate problem to shove that the troops were crossing and difficult for the choice of the right man. Auchinleck felt tied to Ritchie by feelings of esteem and a sense of co-responsibility, but *"the danger of a complete catastrophe was too big-concluded-because they left the responsibility to a subordinate, which for more than several weeks was subjected to an exceptional tension"*<sup>(55)</sup>. In this sense we also expressed Tedder, who had extensive way to observe the work of the command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. Indeed, in his view, not only Ritchie, but also his Chief of Staff, Whiteley, was to be replaced: both looked worn out.

Auchinleck first thought of the Chief of staff, Corbett, but was doubtful about the propriety of sending a suborder to face a possible disaster and Tedder said the boost was himself finally: picking up the fortunes of the Army.

The morning of the 25<sup>th</sup>, therefore, at 09:05 Auchinleck sent a terse telegram to Brooke:

“I’ll remove the command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army from Ritchie this afternoon. I propose giving him temporarily licensed to Palestine, but realize that you return home as soon as possible and to be given command of a corps or an assignment of staff. I think, though solid and decided, he has a tendency to go slow and I fear that the army has to some extent lost confidence in him. I’ll take on Dorman Smith as my Chief of staff, leaving Corbett to represent me at the Grand Headquarters”<sup>(56)</sup>.

At 14:00 Auchinleck and Dorman-Smith climbed on a plane and spent the travel time discussing the latest news. Shortly before departure had come a long telegram from Churchill, sent that same morning early. In Washington, the offers made on the moment Americans were screened in all respects and any change was needed.

"I have already notified-wrote Churchill-that the President intends to send the American 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division, which would for Suez to

on 5 July. We believe that sending this Division within the next month presents serious difficulties.

General Marshall has therefore put forward a proposal that the head of I. G.S.G. judges even more tempting from your point of view, since it allows you to receive a considerable amount of the more modern type material without influence on you receive reinforcements from England. We have therefore agreed to the following proposals: the Americans will send as soon as possible to the Middle East 300 *Sherman* tanks (M 4) and 100 Self-propelled 105 mm howitzers. These materials will leave for Suez on the July 10 in two convoys of ships diverted from sugar traffic in Havana, sailing at 15 and 13 knots respectively; their journey will be hastened with all possible means. A small number of technicians accompany the American tanks and artillery pieces.

You have not the slightest concern about the development of the events in his homeland. Any views I may have on how the battle was fought or the moment had to be fought, you have my full confidence and I share entirely your responsibility <sup>(57)</sup>.

I just showed your letter to the President, who has been very touched and will come to your aid. The difficulties around the carriage by sea of an American armored Division, that appear considerable, are going to iron out. The Americans are also trying to send a large number of a new kind of rocket launchers anti-tank guns which have lots of hopes. Meanwhile, have you heard that the reinforcements of U.S. aircraft are ready to be sent to the Middle East. Are studying plans for another major expedition sent, maybe a hundred wide-ranging bombers as soon as possible, and to hasten the sending of other improved *Grant* tanks. Tomorrow I will propose to the President to an American General with your subordinates, with a seat on the Board of the Middle East, in the understanding that he would voice for both American air units and for ground units.

Please refer to Harwood which are rather concerned about reports on the discouragement and the dominant over panic in Alexandria and to the fact that the Navy is quick to retire to the Red Sea. Although some precautionary measures should be taken and although the *Queen Elizabeth* should leave the port as soon as possible, I need a firm and confident attitude. The information reached the President from Rome suggests that Rommel counts of having to lose three or four weeks before you can organize a violent attack against the positions of Marsa Matruh. And my opinion that procrastination can be much longer.

I hope that the crisis means that all uniformed personnel and all personnel to the services available to be taken at the highest level of combat preparedness. You have a force of more than 700,000 men in the Middle East. Every man skilled in combat should be put into the fight and dying to win. There are reasons why units that defend Marsa Matruh are reinforced by several thousand officers and soldiers to the battalions to swell the services or labor units. You're the same type of situation where we would be if England was invaded: the same indomitable spirit should reign" <sup>(58)</sup>.

The news of more immediate concern was the information that

Rommel would not have attacked before three or four weeks, if not longer. If it were true, the horizon would have less dark colors than it seemed. Without prejudice to, now, the decision not to play everything on the card of Matruh, wouldn't have missed the time to bring the army at El Alamein and reorder, by the returning of the repaired tanks, using the Australian 9th Division and preparing new airfields for the *Force Royal Air*.

Moreover, between the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> other decryption of *Enigma* messages had provided new directions: Rommel's advance probably wouldn't make a pause at the border; the spoils of Tobruk was considerable; the *Panzerarmee* had asked for topographical maps of Matrouh and for Alexandria; the Germans were aware that, according to the American military attaché in Cairo, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had been decisively beaten and that this was the most suitable time for Rommel's penetration up to the Delta.

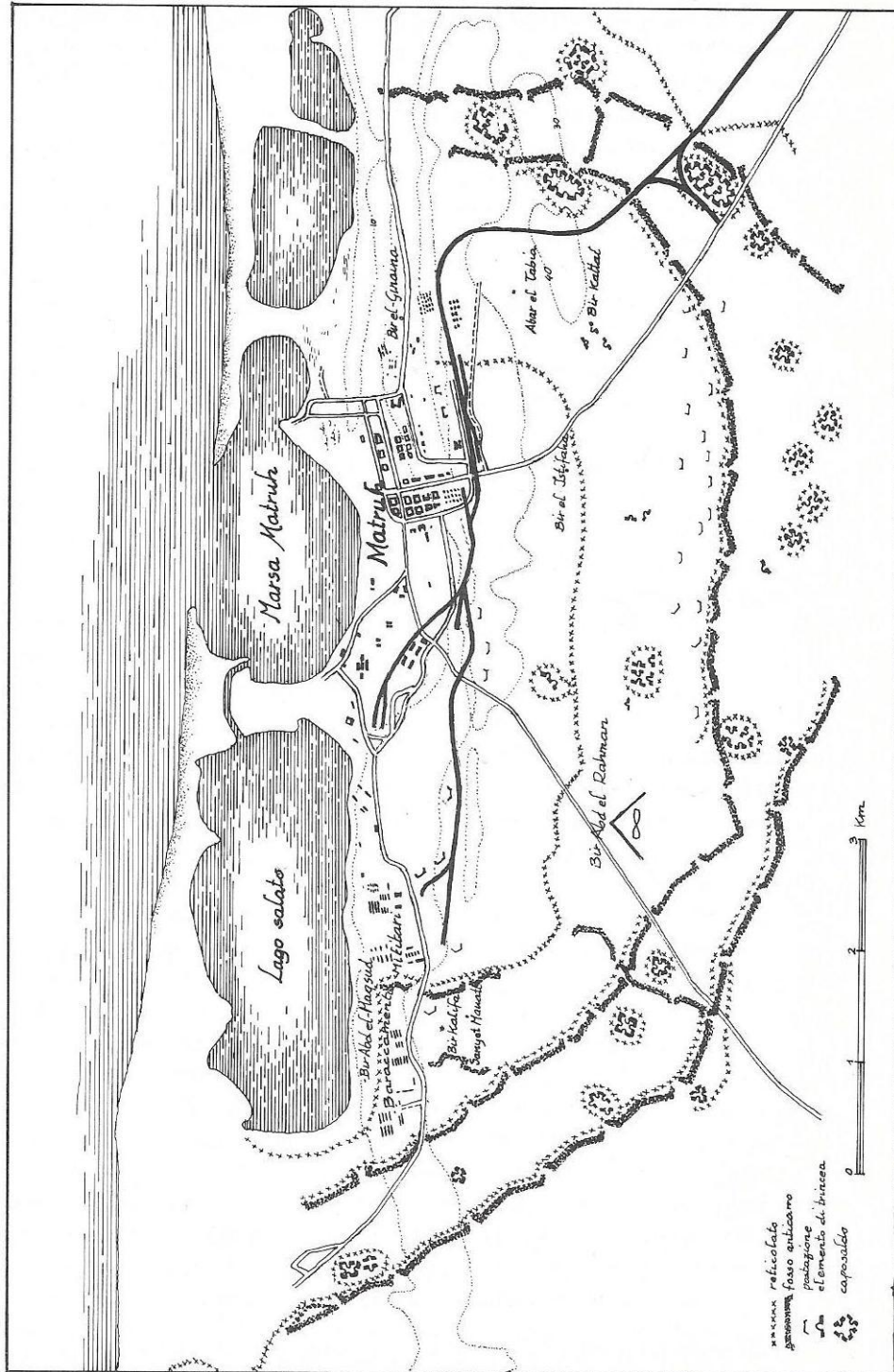
Towards dusk, the plane landed at Maaten Baggush. On the track there was still the Tedder, who, as agreed, had preceded the Commander-in-Chief to anticipate Ritchie's replacement. The conversation between Auchinleck and Ritchie was not long. At the end, the latter descended from his caravan and, alone, climbed onto a car and departed towards Cairo.

Auchinleck began studying the deployment of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army's troops still being defined. The entrenched camp had a perimeter of development some twenty kilometers and an average depth of about four kilometers (sketch No. 48). Its face on the ground included, from outside to inside, an anti-tank ditch continuous, deep and four wide three meters, with sloping outer wall and inner vertical escarpment, both dug into the ground, without coating, so that the ditch was subject to frequent landfills partial demolition action of Khamsin and therefore its passing did not present significant difficulties; an area undermined choppy; a discontinuous range of barbwire at a distance from the anti-tank ditch ranging from 50 to 100 meters; a second anti-tank ditch continuous characteristics similar to the previous one; a second and a third band of barbwire; various obstacles, consisting of railway beams other approximately two meters, in the shape of a St. Andrew's cross, crossed three to three and bolted and strongly connected to each other by sturdy chains. The whole thing was particularly predisposed against provenances from the West. Also was a peripheral system in order to expand the radius of influence of the entrenched camp and set up the pins for the intervention of armored reserves. The system was

The entrenched camp of Matruh

IL CAMPO TRINCERATO DI MATRUH

Schizzo n. 48



the Sidi Hamza, a position some thirty miles South, on the escarpment, with two units of a certain prominence: Sidi Hamza Minqar el Gharbi and Sidi Hamza el Shargi Minqar. And good point out that in 1940 was the base of operation *Compass* and in the 1941 operation *Crusader* in June 1942 had lost a lot of efficiency and status of the stations of the anti-tank ditch and work in general was heavily decayed.

The arrival of the 2nd New Zealand Division (without the 6th Brigade, left at Amiriya), for the garrison of Matruh, had caused a problem. Gen. Freyberg would not see New Zealand troops used for an unproductive all-out resistance and threatened to resort to their own Government. In the end, Ritchie the contented himself and decided to entrust the entrenched camp to the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. On June 23 came from Syria with Gen. Holmes and placed with his command of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps West of Gerawla. The responsibility of the line was then divided: to Holmes was entrusted the entrenched camp; to Gott the south. The first gravitated therefore to Matruh, the second to Sidi Hamza.

On 25 June the deployment of the army was being hasty completion (sketch No. 49). Of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps, 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division was in the stronghold of Matruh and British 50<sup>th</sup>, reinforced by the 4<sup>th</sup> South African Armored cars and 2<sup>nd</sup> South African anti-tank artillery, was set at Gerawla. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corps had the 29<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade (the one left of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division) at Sidi Hamza; the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division at Minqar Qaim, with a battalion at Bir Khalda; The 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division had received the 4<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigades and was located on the escarpment, to the East of the track for Siwa; the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division had been with the Indian 3<sup>rd</sup> Motorized Brigade, even further South, and the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade along the track for Siwa.

In twenty kilometers of emptiness between Matruh and the escarpment, namely between the two Corps, operated two columns (each with an infantry company, a field artillery battery and an anti-tank section), called *Gleecol* and *Leathercol*, with the task of defending the minefield, made at the track to Siwa. This, in essence, the device found by Auchinleck.

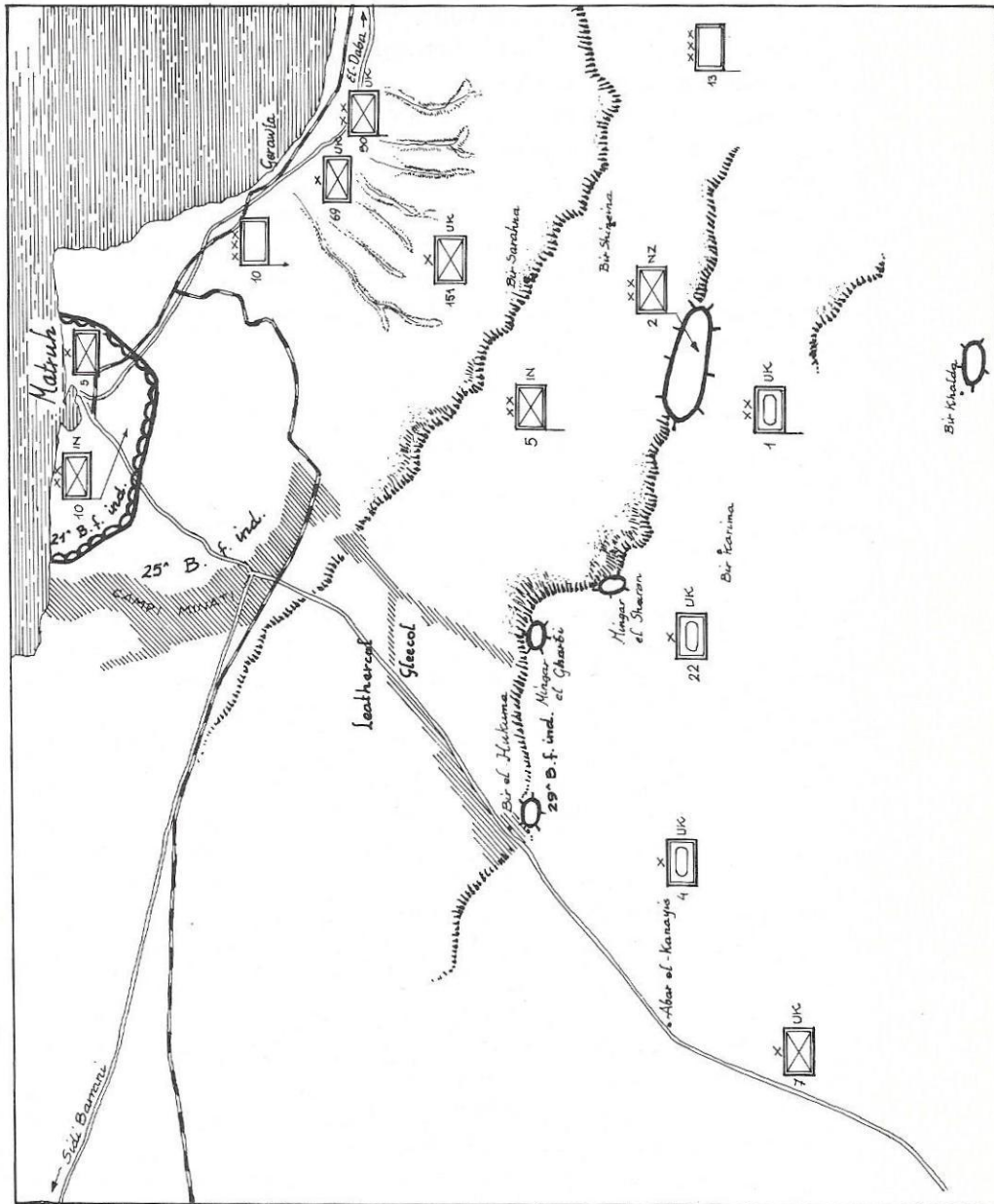
Attlee had been telegraphed the full satisfaction of the war Cabinet in knowing his decision to take direct command of the army and the belief that he could stop Rommel at Matruh and, in due course, throw it back out. But the first visitor to that same evening, on Gen. Holmes, brought fresh news likely to get rid of the hopes raised by Churchill: the enemy



## The British deployment June 25

LO SCHIERAMENTO BRITANNICO IL 25 GIUGNO

Schizzo n. 49



was pretty much in front of 10<sup>th</sup> Corp and in all likelihood, in his view, would attack the following day.

Auchinleck then realized that, despite everything, it was necessary to somewhat accept battle. *“I had a desperate fear that troops of Matruh were surrounded”* he confessed<sup>(59)</sup>. He began to explain to Holmes that was absolutely not allow the blocking of Matruh, then, at 04:15 of 26 June, he sent new orders: the operating address of Ritchie, to stop the enemy advance West of Matruh -Sidi Hamza-Ras el Qattara line, was overtaken by convenience to bind the opponent in the wide area between the abovementioned line and close to El Alamein. It was necessary to *“maintain fluid and mobile troops and hit the enemy from all directions. Armored forces must not be used unless you have favorable conditions. At all costs, even if you were to cede land, I mean keep the 8th Army and not to give hostages to fortune in the form of troops in defense of strongholds that can be easily isolated”*<sup>(60)</sup>.

He also tried to make a tactical approach that avoids the numerous blunt dissection that occurred at the battle of Gazala. The opponent would be immediately attacked by all the artillery of the Division or divisions closer to threaten. Not only, but other large units had to quickly bring in because all mobile units, obviously without fail at the task of defending their assigned front. In essence, the coordination of the reaction was maneuvered into the hands of the Corps commanders. But coordination and cooperation among the various weapons obtained strong importance even among the Corps, so that if a corps or part of it loses ground, the other is immediately able to take advantage of the situation by attacking the enemy on the side quickly and decisively<sup>(61)</sup>.

However there is a particular that should say a few words. While Tobruk was in agony, Ritchie had decided the use of mobile columns drawn from various divisions, formed to exploit them all the firepower available. The rest of the divisions were to provide static defense of the border positions. He missed the time for full implementation of these measures; however, the concept was also preserved on the Matruh: each Division had to regroup in tactical groupings at the level of Brigade, formed from artillery units (core group) and minimum required infantry to defend the locality. The orders in this respect from 22 June Ritchie were confirmed by Auchinleck, which

established that the amount unused in development divisional groupings was sent to El Alamein. Thus, in 10<sup>th</sup> Corp, 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and 50<sup>th</sup> were present only the divisional commands, and a part of each Brigade and the entire divisional artillery. In 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, instead, the 29th Brigade was restructured as said, but the New Zealand 2nd Division provided for itself. Freyberg objected that any transformation must receive the *approval* of your Government, so therefore kept two brigades with himself and left to the East of El Alamein the third, which by the way was not yet moved. As for the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, the 26 June ceded the 1<sup>st</sup> the 7<sup>th</sup> motorized brigade went to El Alamein with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian.

This was a kind of novelty under the operating profile. The conduct of retreating maneuver was planned from the British norm in some other way and based on the principle of avoiding any type of mobile combat. Therefore lacked in leaders and troops the slightest training in such a new procedure, nor many commanders were prepared psychologically to deal with fighting in similar conditions.

On the other hand, the *Desert Air Force* was raging. The great workshop of the base worked strenuously to return to efficiency damaged or faulty units, Delta fighter defense and training units ceded almost all their planes, sent Malta 20 *Spitfire*, two groups of *Beaufighter* and one of *Hurricane* were removed to no. 201 squadron of naval cooperation.

But this effort, which, as we know, had enabled the *Desert Air Force* to achieve numerical superiority of aviation in Africa, was a large measure of tactical and technical nature. All the objectives of Western Cyrenaica were abandoned in favor of those of direct tactical interest for the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the designation of targets at night with lighted flares launched by fleet aviation *Albacore* was adopted even in the desert. In this guise, a few hours after the return of daylight missions, night bombers departed with the *Albacore*. From June 24, day and night, followed raids on the columns of the Italian Corps and the DAK. Kesselring's concerns to move as soon as possible the airbases were well founded.

In the margins of the bad time resulted in the British camp after the fall of Tobruk, he considers interesting report conclusion. On 6 July the Imperial General Staff. sent personally to Gen. Corbett a very inappropriate telegram. The blow suffered and the capture of many prisoners and much material seemed inexplicable in London

and the affair was raising doubts and criticisms "*on the fighting spirit of our commanders.*" Therefore

“the Cabinet want the Chief of the G.S. to lead an investigation and the report as soon as possible on the circumstances under which the surrender took place and in particular the behavior of the General Commander of the fort”.

Corbett sent immediately copy of dispatch to Auchinleck, who immediately turned to Brooke:

I CAN'T believe that the Cabinet has ordered to MY Chief of the G.S. to report on their own on an operation conducted under my command, and I would like a clear explanation on a demand that has the extraordinary.

If the Cabinet wants to send from Britain a fact-finding Commission fine, but ask an officer of my Staff without my consent is unacceptable and I am sure that YOU meant like thing. I would appreciate a lot receive instructions directly from you on a subject so personal importance.

As Corbett said the Vice Chief of the I.G.S.G., I have already given an inquiry into the fall of Tobruk to Wilson, who is a judge of sure competence. Does not propose another initiative” <sup>(62)</sup>.

Brooke declaring on the 14<sup>th</sup> “*very sorry for the misunderstanding* “: there was no intention to leapfrog them wrongly, but the simple desire not to trouble you with such issues when the operating commitment was so great. Wilson was fine for the investigation.

### **3. THE BATTLE OF MATRUH**

The battle of Matruh was horrific. On the one hand, a attacker who, with no clear idea of the deployment and the intentions of an enemy that wants to destroy, sketches a plan based on a hypothesis of the device to break very vague and little care. On the other hand, a defender who takes the action just because he failed to leave on time, but which aims to sneak off soon as offered a favorable opportunity.

On the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> Axis columns were in full motion. Fix guidance and repeated British air raids day and night had caused inconvenience and disappointment, as well as losses.

The XXI Corps was to reach the established line terminating only at 17:00. In fact, arrived at this height and not encountering resistance, went on for a couple of kilometers stopping

at 20:00 at the edge of the mined area West of entrenched camp. The X Corps aligned, to the South of the road, with both divisions. In essence, the fall of night Navarini and Gioda were a dozen kilometers from the track to Siwa.

To the South German columns were at work. The 90<sup>th</sup> Light began in the afternoon its wide envelopment. Stumbles into minefields, fell under the fire of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, or rather its only 29<sup>th</sup> Brigade, and under the bombardment of the *Desert Air Force*, but in the end, after many hours, overcame the mined obstacle, annihilated the *Leathercol* group, took 400 prisoners and still continued until midnight. The DAK, moved at 16:45, and ran into heavy air raids, one of which had caused several casualties in command of the Corps. Of its divisions, the 21st *Panzer* lost some tanks on minefields, overtook the Siwa at 18:15, routed the *Gleecol* group but, with the fire signal made of static structures of the 29<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, ended up stopping at 21:30 against a second minefield. The 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* instead proceeded without encountering exceptional resistance and, at dusk, it stopped at the height of the track for Siwa.

On the right of the DAK was forced to advance the XX Corps, according to the orders given by the army at 08:30. It too was not spared from airstrikes and losses suffered were distinctly heard. Towards 13:00 were mortally stricken in fact the main exponents of the command of the Corps: Gen. Baldassarre (who died at 17:00), Gen. Piacenza and Col. Raffaelli, respectively the commanders of the artillery and engineers. Gen. De Stefanis was appointed temporary replacement to Baldassarre and left the *Ariete* to Gen. Arena, the vice commander. In late afternoon, the southern wing of the mass of maneuver was heavily staggered toward the Southwest so that Rommel led to determine that the *Ariete*, and then the *Littorio*, obliquely North then gets in motion. It is not very clear what he intend to do, however the order was retained only for the *Littorio*, since in the meantime both the *Ariete* and the *Trieste* were to operate on their own account a passage.

In the evening the information service believed: the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division at Matruh; the remains of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division, of 5<sup>th</sup> Indian, of 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Armored deployed alignment Matruh-Sidi Hamza-Bir Khalda, with the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade at on the plateau, as a security echelon. To the rear, in the stronghold of Baggush, seemed prepared the 10th Indian Division. Rommel therefore insisted in the original plan: center penetration with the 21st *Panzer*; enveloping the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp to the

North with the 90<sup>th</sup> Light; the South front pressure against the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and the armored reserve with 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and the Italian XX Corps.

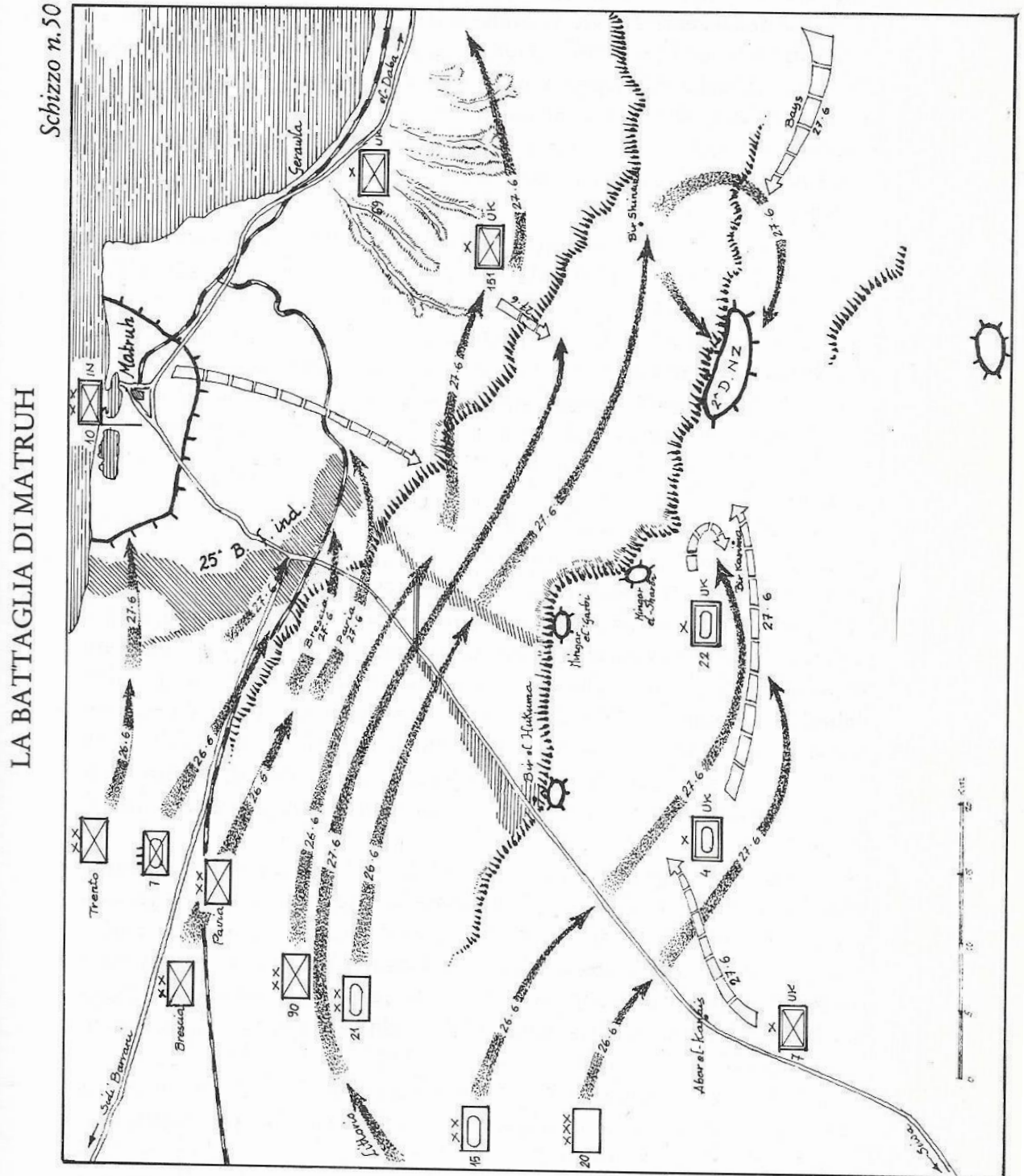
The prize was always Matruh. The two alleged armored divisions gave him not many concerns: a maximum-thought-could have a hundred diverse tanks. Was unaware that the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division had put together 159 tanks, 60 of which were *Grants*, 80 between *Crusader* and *Stuart* and 19 *Valentine*.

The advance in rake by the mass maneuver was of course felt by the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, though, getting conflicting reports, remained uncertain for a long time on the meaning to be attributed to the tactical move of Rommel. The first impression made by the elimination of the *Leathercol* and *Gleecol* groups was that the main effort had been brought to the center of the British deployment, having identified the vote. In addition, according to *Gleecol* it was the intrusion of a hundred *Panzer*, though the report was denied by the command of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp, which ensured that he held the area under surveillance all day long. However the 29<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, disorganized, soon began to recede behind the trail to Bir Khalda.

At dawn on the 27<sup>th</sup> the Italian-German army returned in motion (sketch No. 50). The XXI Corps proceeded slowly because of the vibrant action of opposing fire and depth of minefields, but at 11:00 the *Trento* emerged beyond the passive barrier and a sapper battalion occupied the junction with the trail to Siwa, named by the British *Charing Cross*. Even the encirclement was the consistency by means of X Corps, which followed the southern edge of minefields and rejected an attempted reaction of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, but especially of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light. This, just passed the meridian of Matruh, stumbles upon new resistance, the 9<sup>th</sup> *Durham Light infantry*, encouraged against them since the previous evening. In a head-on collision the 90<sup>th</sup> took 300 prisoners and slightly swept the battalion. Soon after, however, it had to warn the army of being subjected to intense fire from not only from the East (50<sup>th</sup> Division), but also from the South, Minqar Qaim i.e. (2nd New Zealand Division). Was a lull settled soon after the arrival of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, whose entry into the field had already been warned by the New Zealanders: "towards the 09:00 morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> - Gen. Kippenberger wrote -six or seven miles northwest appeared a huge vehicle column, sparkling in the mist and with a group of fifteen tanks." In fact von Bismark was left with sixteen Pzkw III and five Pzkw II.

The 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, which marched Rommel, headed then towards the Southeast until Bir Shineina (about 11 o'clock), but at this point

The Battle of Matruh



major difficulties began. To reach the coast the 90<sup>th</sup> Light would overcome the 151st British Brigade, which is not very difficult in itself, but it would have been completely insulated, because the X Corps of Gioda was South of *Charing Cross*. Shortly before 13:00 Rommel visited the command of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, congratulated and urged the continuation of the advance so as to touch the coast before night. At the same time, hastened the influx of the *Littorio*, which with a night march was brought under, to fill the gap that was created with the *Pavia*.

For the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* the discourse was different. Was to march North of the rocky slope where the New Zealanders had spent the night digging feverishly, with the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade (Gen. Kippenberger) at Minqar Qaim, the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade (Gen. Inglis) East of the Bir Khalda track and the Divisional reserve in the middle, that is astride the track. Having seen to the long German column, the New Zealand guns opened fire and soon began an artillery duel that lasted until Rommel not realizing that on the plateau of Sidi Hamza were there multiple opponents than was believed.

On the other hand also the 15th *Panzer* was somewhat embarrassed. It was thrown forward, keeping South of Sidi Hamza, but was soon hit by the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade and the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade and then from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade, and it couldn't open the pass. After noon Rommel pushed the 21st *Panzer* to attack the Minqar Qaim positions, in order to accelerate the entry into the fight of the 15<sup>th</sup>. Then ordered XX Corps, which proceeded with the planned division in deep echelon to protect the left of DAK – to act employing the tactics of Nehring “*for mopping up the area in front of the 15th Panzer and the encirclement of enemy groups*”.<sup>(63)</sup>

Auchinleck was trying to locate the thread driving the battle. It wasn't easy to orientate themselves on the basis of conflicting and confusing reports, but considered that Rommel had with him about two hundred tanks and 30,000 men, at 11:20 signaled Holmes and Gott which, if it were to become necessary, it was that the two Corps disengaged and around double back more or less to the meridian of Fuka and agree to battle again.

Even before receiving news of the operation *Pike* (the conventional name given to the movement on the rear line), Gott, gave at 11:00 to the commander of the 2nd New Zealand Division, had this to say to Freyberg of “*vacate where forced and not consider vitally important positions on which to deploy*”<sup>(64)</sup>. Indeed, in full



spirit of understanding manifested by Auchinleck to assume command, pointed instructions to any withdrawal operation. The Corps had to move first to a line to about fifteen kilometers west of Fuka, and then to the narrows of El Alamein. Each Division, protected by his rearguard, would follow an independent itinerary: the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian in the North, 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand in the Middle and 1<sup>st</sup> Armored in the South.

At noon he reported to the army the following impressions from visiting New Zealanders: taking into account the effects of violent enemy artillery fire, leading to greater range, and in front of the expected German attack, had authorized Freyberg to concentrate more. But he had refused the reinforcement of a *Valentine* unit, intending to preserve united armored forces. Dorman-Smith told him that would have given orders to the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp to launch a strong attack toward the South, so as to ease the pressure on the New Zealanders. In fact, around 15:00 Holmes received the directives in that regard, he laid out the action from the British 50<sup>th</sup> Division starting at 17:30.

Meanwhile von Bismark had attacked Minqar Qaim from the North-East with a part of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and the rest had climbed up on the escarpment in a large enveloping movement, bending towards the West. He met soon the enemy's vehicle echelon, sweeping him into the ebb on the Division and partly to try out southward, then faced the New Zealand locations. The fight did not lead to concrete results. The 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade of Inglis was seriously engaged, but he held firm, thanks to numerous 6 pounder guns which arrived just that morning <sup>(65)</sup> at 16:00, Freyberg asked the intervention of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division.

The Gen. Lumsden, who had already lost fifteen tanks, was slowly retreating before the 15th *Panzer* and the *Ariete*. At the request of Freyberg sent 3<sup>rd</sup> *County of London Yeomanry*. Regardless of where this confusion came and to which it was first taken under fire by New Zealanders, the move provoked a sudden threat to the 21st *Panzer*, since for fortuitous conjunction was coming from the East on the battlefield the *Queen's Bays* with 35 tanks, such as the Third Regiment of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade. Just stopping and settling quickly on defense and taking advantage of the complete lack of initiative and British field coordination, von Bismarck was able to reverse the threat of being split into two.

Rommel that day was really lucky. If Gott had

a better perception of the course of the fighting, greater confidence or simply had not suffered the undoubted strain nervous, the DAK and the XX Corps were beaten separately and with a blow to the flank, Auchinleck would have reversed the situation. Gott in the afternoon instead became convinced that the German attack Minqar Qaim to would not have been arrested by the New Zealanders, with disastrous consequences for 13<sup>th</sup> Corp. In this persuasion said to Lumsden, who wanted to bring the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division to better cope with the Italian-German threat: “*it's over*” and added: “*New Zealand Division no longer exists*”<sup>(66)</sup>. In this context, at 16:55 13<sup>th</sup> Corp command sent to the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division a rather obscure message, from which it appeared that New Zealanders had abandoned Minqar Qaim; as a result the Division could withdraw at its discretion to the East of the trail to Bir Khalda. A similar communication, but without a time group, was also sent to the 2nd New Zealand. “*Both messages - observes Playfair - are unexplained and there is no indication of their author, except the use of the pronoun I in each, which you'd think their filling by Gott*”<sup>(67)</sup>. And when Freyberg made contact with Lumsden, he learned that he was preparing to leave on his own.

In that while Freyberg was injured. Succeeded by Gen. Inglis, Commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Knowing that Gott had declared Minqar Qaim ownership not critical decided to withdraw also it just fell in the evening. At about 17:00 asked, therefore, the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps enlightenment on locations in which direction to move. The response indicated (at least it was understood so) Bab el Qattara depression, a place thirty kilometers southwest of El Alamein, which meant skipping a stop at Fuka.

Almost simultaneously, Rommel, both because the radio intercepts had hints of British orientation to abandon the battlefield, both because fooled by the ease with which the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and the *Littorio* were penetrated between Matruh and the escarpment of Sidi Hamza, came to the conclusion that the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was routed and stimulated the 90<sup>th</sup> Light at 17:20, reduced to 1,600 men, to go at full speed toward the coast and the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* to “*continue in the late evening to chase the enemy to Fuka.*” Nehring, who saw what was amassing on the plateau of Sidi Hamza, demonstrated the utter skepticism: “*The Corps (...) it did not, however, there is no doubt that this operation is not possible today because of the enemy situation*”<sup>(68)</sup>. However warned De Stefanis that the 15<sup>st</sup>

*Panzer* would attack shortly afterwards and that, therefore, the *Ariete* tightened below.

For El Daba, where had moved the Command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Auchinleck followed the events at best. Had reported to London that the overall picture was "satisfactory" so far, confirmed the imminent counterattack of 10<sup>th</sup> Corp from Matruh towards South and 7th Brigade against the rear of the motorized DAK, and renewed the purpose of leave Matruh rather to see you blocked most of his remaining troops. Among other things, his service information overestimated Rommel's forces.

At 19:20, suddenly and initiative, the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp sent coded orders to begin the *first phase* of withdrawal, that is, the offset on the positions of Fuka, its three divisions: the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian, 1<sup>st</sup> Armored and 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand. However, while for the first two indicated the target, it was strangely quiet for New Zealand, they then headed towards Bab el Qattara depression. Then Gott told of the measure taken to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Command. Here they were caught on the wrong foot, because the attack toward the South required to the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp had to be already underway and the retreat of the 13th Corps would seriously compromise the position of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp. Dorman-Smith commented: "*It was not expected that if they go (...). When he learned that the New Zealand Division had withdrawn, the command of the army was very surprised. As it was very surprised that 13<sup>th</sup> Corp was in the course of withdraw. The 10<sup>th</sup> Corp was left to fight to get out of a difficult situation.*" And stated: "*the plan was that the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp attack North and help each other to succeed*" and especially that the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp "*was to hold the escarpment until after the departure of 10<sup>th</sup> Corp*"<sup>(69)</sup>. However, the trouble was done and it was addressed in some way. As a result, he was immediately given the *Pike* order in the hope that it gave to Holmes in time to cancel or stop the attack without much difficulty and instead start to retreat.

As if the very uncertain command action wasn't enough, something interrupted radio links between Matruh and El Daba from 19:30 to 04:30 of the next day.

At dusk of the 27<sup>th</sup> Axis troops were more or less the following: the 90<sup>th</sup> Light had reached the eastern coast of Gerawla; the gaunt *Littorio* was Northwest of Bir Sarahna, a dozen kilometers from the 90<sup>th</sup>; X Corps was stationed South of the entrenched camp at the railway line, with the *Brescia* East of trail to Siwa and the *Pavia* on the right; the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, with 14 tanks and 600 exhausted men, isolated stood East of Minqar

Qaim; the 15th *Panzer* and the *Ariete* were stopped in the area of Bir Karima; the *Trieste*, on the right of the *Ariete*, watched the South flank.

Holmes launched his attack in the evening, but it was a completely detached and disconnected. The 50th Division was articulated in a number of columns: two failed to make contact with the Italian-Germans and after a few hours they returned to the starting point; one got lost in the darkness, ended on the 90th Light at Menton and was repulsed with losses; the final two affected on the *Littorio*. The great Italian units had arrived in the late morning at Minqar Qaim North and, after more than one change in the lineup, had placed a cornerstone with the 12th Bersaglieri, whose shelter was the tactical Command of the Italian-German army. The British action was chaotic and conduct and rejected so blindly, involved Rommel himself. After a fierce fighting, the British withdrew rather shaken, leaving 200 prisoners and having lost several vehicles. About the confusion reigning in that overnight, suffice to note that none of the protagonists manages to locate the enemy with which collided. Least of all Rommel, who, later, stated "*the fight between my unit and the New Zealand reached an exceptional violence*", confusing the more or less contemporary clash between the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand and the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* with that between the British 50<sup>th</sup> and the *Littorio* and his own *Kampfstaffel*. Among other things, Rommel continued to be convinced that at Matruh fought New Zealand units <sup>(70)</sup>.

However the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, directed their transport toward the southward and was rejected by 580<sup>th</sup> Recon Bn. and various units, including elements of the *Pavia*.

Late in the evening the Italian -German intelligence service had tried to summarize the enemy situation. At Matruh was the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division with three brigades and elements of the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade; to the East of the trail to Bir Khalda, the 69<sup>th</sup> and 151<sup>st</sup> brigades of the 50th Division; in the area of Sidi Hamza parts of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and the 4th and 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigades; between Siwa and Bir Khalda, eighty tanks of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Divisions, two armored regiments and the 29th Indian Brigade; at Sidi Haneish, about fifty kilometers south-east of Matruh, the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Brigades of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. On airfields between Matruh and El Daba were detected altogether 560 aircraft. The reconstruction couldn't be very faithful, but its tactical significance in the eyes of Rommel is translated in the Matruh garrison (10th Indian division reinforced) surrounded by the XXI Corps, X Corps on the West and the *Littorio* to the South and 90<sup>th</sup> Light to the East; and in a heterogeneous mass of

units which included the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division and the Armored brigades, intent on escaping the encirclement by the DAK and XX Corps.

Aside from the incorrect identification of certain British units and operational opportunities which were offered to Gott, you must agree that all things considered Rommel's insight proved right. The next day he ordered the annihilation of two groups of enemy forces and predicted the pursuit by the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and the *Littorio* passed Fuka. But the night was long.

Before leaving the area of Sidi Hamza, Gen. Lurnsden wanted to make contact with Freyberg. At 21:15 showed up at Minqar Qaim, learned of Freyberg injury and talked with the Gen. Inglis. He could accept the request for a withdrawal coordinated between the two divisions because he had to refuel at the fuel depot of Bir Khalda and also because tied to a particular route. He agreed, however, to take the New Zealand battalion deployed with him to Bir Khalda and the transport of the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade, there flowed back in disarray in the afternoon. As for their Division, Gen. Inglis had already devised a plan based on surprise and vehemence of execution: the 4th Brigade was to open up a passage by force, and behind it would be released the bulk. At 22:30 the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade marched east. The action with the German rifle I/104<sup>th</sup> was wild. The German battalion came out of the melee partially destroyed and the New Zealand Brigade earned the free space. Instead the remnant of the large unit (Division Command, 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade and reserve) at the last moment followed another direction, fearing to find an enemy now alerted, and then ready to receive him, took another way. Therefore a column improbable, with a whole host of men clinging to every means available, including rotated guns, headed south and that is ... right on "*an encampment of about a dozen German tanks so close together that I could not go through them*"<sup>(71)</sup>. After a brief but spectacular melee between the Germans who recovered from the surprise and the New Zealanders who gambled for freedom, the latter managed to pass. At 02:30 the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* signaled to the DAK that all attacks were repelled, although the enemy had managed to open up a corridor with the support of tanks. "*It's very likely-admitted the message-that they escaped through these gaps with the bulk of their force*"<sup>(72)</sup>.

On the morning of 28<sup>th</sup> Auchinleck expressed the hope to gain some time at the location of Fuka. "*My intention, at first, is to stop the enemy and defeat him at the first opportunity,*" but realize that everything depended on the conditions under which

were Holmes and Gott. Although no precise news, he wrote to London:

"Gott I reported yesterday afternoon that because of enemy movement southward against the eastern flank of New Zealanders did not feel safe to stay in the area of Sidi Hamza -Minqar Qaim and he would retire to the Fuka line in sticking to my original design. I then ordered the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp to adapt" <sup>(73)</sup>

and added:

"Because of the great distances and fluidity of battle, the links are more difficult, but Gott this seems to believe controlled the situation on the front of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp and yesterday's operations a success" <sup>(74)</sup>.

In fact the success of retreating maneuver depended to a large extent how possible to organize Fuka. Here there was the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division, reduced to a couple of tactical groups (the *Gleecol* and *Scotco*!) and the remains of 29<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, though even the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division had received orders to flow to *Fuka*, keeping on the southern flank of the position. All in all that morning could appear justified the hopes of some breath, thinking that Rommel could not have continued, leaving behind the entire 10<sup>th</sup> Corp concentrate in Matruh. Instead two major unforeseen things turned upside down the British project.

The first was the interruption of radio links, which you mentioned. The relative order to 10<sup>th</sup> Corp, sent from the Army at 22:00 of June 27, was received by Gen. Holmes only at 04:30 of the 28<sup>th</sup>, *when the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp was literally missing*-as Gen. Wilson commented a few weeks later *-leaving the 10<sup>th</sup> in trouble"* <sup>(75)</sup>. Indeed, Holmes was already in full alert since the previous evening, when the race to the coast of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light had dislodged his Corps headquarters. What happened was so sudden and unexpected that Commander and Chief of the general staff had agreed to separate to get reacquainted with the units, since the transmission centre had scattered. However on the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> Holmes set about preparations to break the isolation.

Being of local nature anything but a simple problem, explained to the army that it was stuck and that was to choose among three alternatives: forcing the lock made by the 90<sup>th</sup> Light in the area of Gerawla; break through to the South and then turn to the East; or concentrating two divisions and solve the situation with the fighting. The message itself crossed with a communication from the army, according to which Maaten Baggush (i.e. Sidi Haneish) seemed already in

German hands and Matruh in the process of being attacked from the South. So the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp had to try to fight their way to Fuka, the coastal strip. In the early afternoon, though, came the reply by Auchinleck at the dilemma presented by Holmes:

"There is even talk of solving the situation with fighting. There is no time to mount an organized attack along the coastal road, missing probably a goal. You must escape tonight with all your troops opened up wide front, head to the East, on the escarpment, and reach El Daba. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corp will cover your move" <sup>(76)</sup>.

Holmes then, agree with the army, established the sortie for 21:00 hours. The two divisions made incursions in the southern sector continuing to thirty kilometers, and then they would be aimed to the East with an appointment to Fuka. Throughout the day the positions were to be kept without modification, with the exception of the western perimeter of the entrenched camp, whence the 21<sup>st</sup> Indian Brigade was removed and moved near Gerawla.

The second cause of the non-defense of Fuka and the consequent new disastrous British attack was formed by Rommel's temperament. He was not the man to leave time to a beaten opponent, especially in those situations. Around 08:00 of 28 June the information gathered by the *Panzerarmee* gave the British 1st Armoured Division in the area of Bir Khalda and elements of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian to the South of Gerawla. It was established the withdrawal of 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Motorized Brigade. While the command of the army, issued the succinct informative report, the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer, followed by *Ariete* and the *Trieste*, exceeded the trail to Bir Khalda, providing the certainty that there was no more trace of the enemy, at least in the immediate vicinity.

Now Rommel ordered Nehring to cut off the retreat of British motorized units. In this context, the *Littorio* had to stop on the coastal road immediately west of Fuka, while 21st *Panzer* had reached a ridge southwest of the village. The circulated operating report at 09:00 translated into three points: beat the forces that opposed the advance of the DAK and XX Corps; destroy those surrounded in Matruh; achieve a safe channel of supplies along the coast road until West of Matruh, and then on the rear of the X Corps.

The elimination of the garrison at Matruh was entrusted to the infantry divisions. Indeed, the action against the entrenched camp had to start very soon. At 02:00 Navarini had placed the attack by

of *Trento* and the 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, starting at 05:30, astride the road from *Charing Cross* to Matruh. On the right would act the X Corps and on the opposite side of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light. However to the West and South the concentric advance was heavily slowed by minefields, by artillery and interdiction by the *Desert Air Force*, and to the East the Germans were pinned down by resistance from the 21<sup>st</sup> Indian Brigade.

In the afternoon, the circle around the entrenched camp tried in vain to get some decisive advantage, but even a *Stuka* could allow breaking: too small were the forces available. Not for nothing is induced to represent Navarini to the Comando Superiore the absolute need to bring in the combat zone, the two battalions of the *Trento* and the infantry regiments of the *Sabratha* left in the area of Bardia for lack of vehicles. At 21:00 troops formed for immediate contact with the permanent defense works.

Meanwhile the *Littorio* had achieved the objective assigned to it without encountering difficulties and at 18:45 the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* was overlooking on the embankment above the coastal road, spotting a large concentration camp in vehicles in the area of Fuka. It was the 29th Indian Brigade, but was not a problem for von Bismarck: grabbed them by the chest, was overwhelmed by leaving in German hand 200 prisoners, large quantities of ammunition and several vehicles (sketch No. 51).

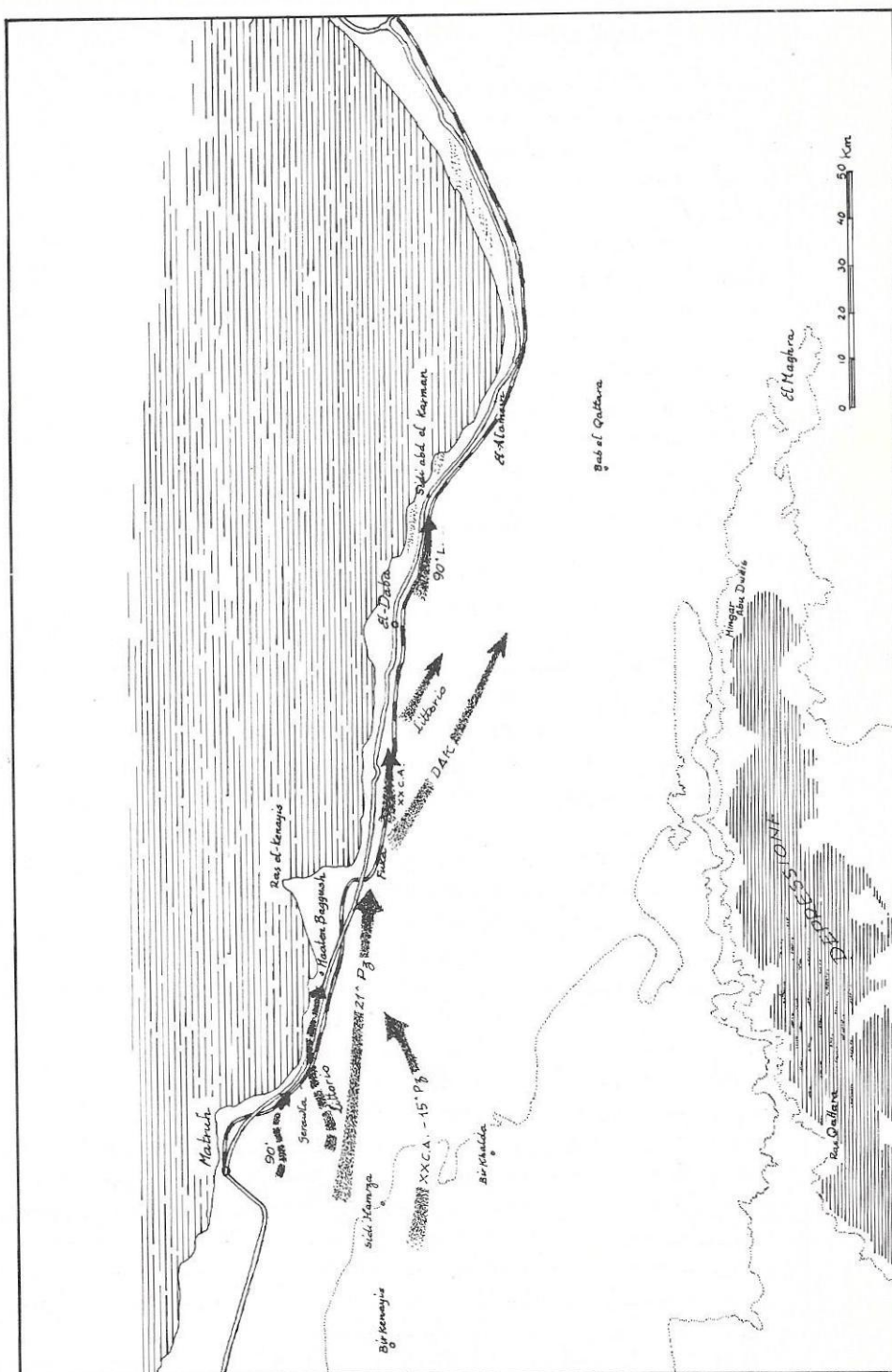
At this point Rommel resigned to postpone after the concentric assault on Matruh, while not hiding the risk of an attempt to breakout in the night of the garrison. It was time for Holmes. The two divisions of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps were divided into tactical groupings at the brigade level, according to a form that appeared to offer some new possibilities.

They were a sudden clashes almost everywhere, the common feature of which was the disorder. Almost all columns ran into Axis units were a sleep and surprised, the difficulty of guidance, the excitement, the lack of information on both sides arrived unexpectedly in the most complete confusion.

The areas in which British columns attempted escape were to the south (X Corps, 580<sup>th</sup> Recon Bn. and *Kampfstaffel* Kiehl) and to the East (90<sup>th</sup> Light and *Littorio*)<sup>(77)</sup>. Some of them were lucky enough to find space between the maze on the broad front held by the 580<sup>th</sup> Recon Bn. and by the *Kampfstaffel* and everything was simpler for them, others found resistance but passed; others eventually were defeated. Altogether the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and the British 50<sup>th</sup> lost that day about 2,000 prisoners.



Schizzo n. 51



However the real, serious, problem was not total the evacuation of the garrison of Matruh, so had to get on with the operation, but the incursion on Fuka by the 21st Panzer who was blocking the main route of retreat and could announce the capture of another 1,600 prisoners, of materials, vehicles and guns. During the night the *Trieste* and *Ariete* were on the route followed by columns of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp and intercepted taking 530 prisoners and some field guns.

Satisfaction for the new victory, acquired a major disappointment in Rommel: a number of units were able to escape and among them the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division.

*“It was necessary to reach and conquer the position of El Alamein-wrote Rommel-until his preparation were not yet complete, before the remains of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had had time to organize a defense. This bastion was the last barrier that the British could oppose to our advanced. If it broke, it was free for us the path into the Nile Delta”* <sup>(78)</sup>.

At 09:38 of the June 29 issued the first guidance order: *“Probably the enemy retreats towards the line of Fuka. The army is preparing to attack (...). The attack will start presumably on the afternoon of the 30<sup>th</sup>”* <sup>(79)</sup>. There was some doubt about a possible battle of arrest imposed at Fuka by the enemy, because you knew that on these positions the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division was doing his best to receive the stragglers of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps and protect their escape to the East; but soon there was confirmation that the 8th Army intended to gather at El Alamein.

The *Littorio* was the first unit to move. It was still lacking in the XII Tank battalion and most of the LI Tank, was still very rearward, so the bulk of the Division was composed of the 12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri <sup>(80)</sup>. From 02:30 in the morning had been dealing with attacks of British jeeps always larger particularly between 07:30 and 10:30. However these attempts, originating from west of the coastal roadway, had come up empty, leaving in the hands of the 12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri 145 prisoners, including 4 officers, in addition to the destruction or capture of thirteen vehicles, two guns and other war material. Around 14:00 Rommel went to Gen. Bitossi, was pleased with the good evidence given by the units at Matruh and ordered to continue, after a stop at the airfield of *Fuka* to stock up on water and fuel. On the right were to move the DAK and XX Corps to move southeast of Sidi Abd el Rahman, while the 90<sup>th</sup> Light would be processed along the paved road up passed El Daba. Was considered, chances of the intervention of British mechanized formations. The XXI Corps,

leaving the II/61<sup>st</sup> infantry at Matruh, had as a point of arrival El Daba; the X was to close on Fuka.

The slowdown that the enemy sought to develop, the early morning hours of June 30 saw a column of the British 1st Armored Division stand between the XX Corps and the DAK and around 05:00, attacking the first without hesitation. It was not evidently a big danger, but only stop being well aware of what it was all about and explain to reject the attempt was a waste of time that Rommel was unwilling to accept. Having prevented the enemy from using Fuka made him believe possible to overcome the momentum of resistance of El Alamein and proceed to destroy the remains of the 8th Army, before it received reinforcements and reorganized. Later, the route would continue on the coastal road up to 20 kilometers from the junction to Cairo in order to leave Auchinleck uncertain about the direction of attack. The XXI Corps would be employed to block the origin from Alexandria, while the few armored forces would have withdrawn to the Southeast to reach the street of Cairo and head for the capital. Of course Rommel was well aware of the exceptional effort that required of the troops, but was convinced that the speed was the only weapon capable of overcoming the situation and that it would secure the enterprise with the utmost boldness to the hilt.

That time was precious is undeniable, but the carelessness about the real extent of the enemy and, especially, about the possibility of transfer of the Italian so-called motorized and armored divisions (while giving the doubt by these not everything worked properly) leaves some perplexity. However the day was not exactly stellar for the Italian columns.

The *Littorio* soon met a lot of trouble. According to Rommel's orders, was supposed to have on the left the 580<sup>th</sup> Recon Bn. and on the right the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*. Perhaps because of the different speed of progression in the desert, perhaps due to the absence of radio connections, the *Littorio* proceeded virtually isolated. At around 05:30, Southeast of *Fuka*, a British formation of about ten tanks and a artillery unit, facing South, opened fire on Italian led echelon. Convinced on having on the flanks the above mentioned German units, Bitossi ordered the LI Tank battalion to attack with its 21 efficient tanks. You ignore that the opponent had a *Grant*, however had guns with armor-piercing ammunition that could safely take advantage of the greater range and power than the 47/32 mm gun of the M 13 tank. The damage was serious: the Commander of the

133<sup>rd</sup> tank wounded, the Commander of the LI tank battalion killed, nine medium tanks out of action and 11 damaged or broken down, the last three light tanks out of action. Considering the effects of a couple of subsequent British nighttime air raids that put some out of action, which caused other losses and destroyed some 20 vehicles, Bitossi's message to the Comando Superiore was dejected:

“Day 30<sup>th</sup>, Situation. Losing a hundred men and twenty tanks. Division committed by several days, exhausted every spare, deprived of services, without additional logistical supply, require urgent medical equipment, fuel, water”.

The fact that the episode, very limited in size, had caused sensational results was objectively difficult to accept with serenity, but the thing “staged” immediately in ironic German comments <sup>(81)</sup> and these later held.

What's more, the *Ariete* had that day in just eight efficient tanks and also quickly encountered difficulty in making their way among the English raids. Rommel not looked for understated and at 09:00 prompted De Stefanis: “*I question that XX Corps attacks the enemy and annihilate and reaches the goal. The enemy had to fall back on (...)*.”, and at 10:45 returned to the charge: “*I hope that soon the XX Corps annihilate an enemy so ridiculous.*”

Communications between the area of Matruh and Alexandria was reduced at that time essentially to coastal roadway. Further South, and with parallel development to the roadway, was called the depression of El Qattara but became passable for vehicles only at El Alamein. So it's easy to understand the frequency of interruption of the movement for the huge coastal clogged and the tips of both enemy columns. Happened to the *Brescia* to be stop by enemy fire and stave off the threat by deploying the 2nd quick artillery group. In this circumstances, Rommel, finding himself present in this case, said the Gen. Lombardi that “*the enemy was surprised that our units were already so forward; that, finally, he did not believe the goal of the Army if not in Cairo (...) this coveted objective would be attained within 15 days*” <sup>(82)</sup>. Then obviously a phenomenological point of view, at least in General, partly because a captured document outlined a British deployment a certain respect, despite the undoubted strain of some divisions and fifty kilometers across. Between the towns of El Alamein and the El Qattara depression were in line: to the North the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp with the English 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., the Indian 10th Inf. Div., the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. and a South African Brigade

in reserve; to the South the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp with the New Zealand 2nd Inf. Div., the Indian 5<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. and a South African Brigade in reserve. It seemed the two armored divisions covered the front of their Corps.

As the Axis forces were still on the move, that the supplies were precarious and that the resumption of airstrikes and sandstorms contributed to slowing down the progression, Rommel decided to postpone the attack on the early hours of 1 July. Taking the dispositions, first scheduled for 17:00 of the 30<sup>th</sup>, was moved to the morning hours.

The frequency with which Rommel had to affirm his moves do not rely on an adventurous determination, but descended from a balanced assessment of the terms of the operating problem. There are substantial difficulties in accepting in principle these “pseudo-justification” -Rommel knew perfectly to be accused to gamble more often - but he is inclined to believe that at Matruh he pushed things to the limits of recklessness.

You don't want to here allude to the decision to run to the Delta, a decision intended to be the subject of hot controversy and accusations, but simply to fit the position. And clear his conviction not to find a resistance so as to constitute a hazard to the small and tired Italian-German troops. A really excessive optimism, which do not even deny during the battle and in particular in the difficult situation in the late afternoon of June 27, at which about von Mellenthin will observe: “*this shows that Rommel had an absolute disdain for the enemy and not had any idea of his critical situation*”<sup>(83)</sup>.

The facts that played significantly in his favor, and definitely had, were three: the operational capability of its troops, errors and distrust of the opponent.

On the first there is little to say as the highest average level of commanders and German units is out of the question. However you should consider that the losses from contingent amounted to 300 officers, 570 NCO's and 2,490 troops, namely 15% of this total force. Most officer losses reached peaks of 70% in the armored units and in the infantry of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light. The behavior of Italian columns must recognize that couldn't be higher than permitted by too modest means of combat, transport, link available. Will impress applicants late unit movements, but there is nothing surprising if you remember-that just it doesn't

seems to happen often-some features: the Italian troops were *not* motorized; the lion's share of supplies and readjust at all the units from the spoils of war at Tobruk, Bardia, Sollum, Matruh had always been taken by the Germans; hundreds of captured British transport had represented a boon, it is true, but the lack of spare parts and the lack of knowledge of the vehicles were bringing the situation to the *status quo ante*, particularly bearing in mind the length of the distance; given the types of wheeled means, bulletproof and armored that endowed the German columns had a cruising speed off-road of about 20 kilometers per hour, whereas those of the Italian touched 7 – 8 kph.

As for the errors of the British leaders, the first, in the judgment of Dorman-Smith, was committed by Auchinleck. The entrenched camp of Matruh had a flaw: it was situated on a promontory, accessible only from the coastal road. According To Dorman-Smith:

"It would have been a wise measure to leave immediately, on 26 June, the promontory of Marsa Matruh by the bulk of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps, leaving only a few units on minefields cover between the West coast of Marsa Matruh and Minqar Omar. Though Matruh was a position that had a certain international reputation, although its strategic value was poor; the news of his hasty abandonment would cause consternation and Auchinleck was opposed on principle to retire"<sup>(84)</sup>.

It is very clear the meaning to be attributed to the affirmation that Auchinleck was contrary to retire, however, as we know, he was practically forced to wait for Rommel on the Matruh and the relief appears to be founded.

The second accusation is brought by von Mellenthin. Auchinleck had issued precise directives about the intention of opposing "the most energetic resistance possible" to the enemy and about the conduct of the fighting by the Corps: "*If a corps or part of it loses ground, the other is immediately able to take quick advantage of the situation by attacking the enemy on the flank*", but had also made it clear in no uncertain terms that they wanted to bet the 8th Army at Matruh, namely that it was decided to fall back as soon as the danger of turning arises.

"A battle-commented von Mellenthin-cannot be fought that way. If not considered Auchinleck strong enough to stand at Matruh, had to withdraw to Alamein. If he wanted to fight at Matruh-and his forces were sufficient for a successful defense in place-then it shouldn't give the suborders the idea that you were only temporizing combat.

As a result of hesitation by Auchinleck, the British not only lost their big chance to destroy the *Panzerarmee* but suffered a serious reverse, which could easily turn into catastrophic disaster. I want to emphasize this point because for the scholar of the conduct of combat, few battles are instructive as to Matruh”<sup>(85)</sup>.

One cannot but agree in full. You might notice that an energetic and careful command action by Gott would equally could determine the success of the United Kingdom, but also in this respect, it is undeniable the influence exerted by Auchinleck on two commanders, mainly on Gott. It was his fault? Partly no, for sure: he could not but suffer heavily from the existing confusion and vagueness and incompleteness of the information on the enemy and even the situation of the army. These are the problems that arise when replacing a commander on the run-up to a battle. Moreover, surprised that he had not sought an immediate personal contact with Gott who had armored and motorized forces.

As for the latter, you can limit to mention once again von Mellenthin:

“Marshal Foch once claimed that "*a lost battle is a battle that you think you have lost*" and this applies exactly to the situation in the area of Marsa Matruh on 27 June”<sup>(86)</sup>.

That day, and mainly that afternoon, the Goddess of Fortune given to Rommel with both hands to distorting the balance and energy of Gott and infusing in him a pessimism that caused an incredible 13<sup>th</sup> Corp in failure. The consequences of that deficient action of command had major repercussions for the entire 8<sup>th</sup> Army was lost an opportunity to achieve the victory, missed the hoped battle of arrest at Fuka and the retreat turned into a messy and chaotic movement toward East. In a Word, opened *The Flap*, the crisis.

NOTE TO CHAPTER 6.

1. The following follows the narration of von Mellenthin (op. cited, pp. 149-150). Kesselring also provides a different version. Not only is the meeting in the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, but nothing says on the contrast of views: “(...) I found him he was dictating orders to advance to Sidi el Barran. established by the noon of the same day. This plan responded to my concepts and does not prejudice the attack on Malta” (op. cited, p. 126).
  2. DSCSAS, tele/01 11932 Op. date 21.6.1942, at 11:45.
  3. DSCS tele 31249/Op. date 21.6.1942, hours 21:00.
  - 4 From the minutes of the meeting of 19 June day (USSME, op. cited, p. 613). With regard to the British convoy, it was a false alarm.
  5. Letter 21.6.1942 of Mussolini to Hitler-Annex No. 20.
  6. E. VON RINTELEN, op. cited above, p. 159.
  7. Diary Cavallero.
  8. It is apparent from the mod. Telegraph *Funkzentrale Rom*, delivered in original German to the Comando Supremo, the message was sent the 22<sup>nd</sup> at 18:35 and received in Rome at 21:12 of the same day.
  9. E. VON RINTELEN, op. cited above, pp. 159-160. The *Kriegstagebuch* of SKL reports, under the date of 22 June: “*Marshal Rommel has the purpose to continue the offensive. The Duce will not give the green light, but wants to withdraw the forces planned to carry out the operation Hercules. The Fuhrer, by means of a phone call to our General at the Italian Comando Supremo [von Rintelen] or possibly the Duce, wants to get handheld for Rommel and is in the concept that the Hercules may be postponed to the end of August*” (K. ASSMANN, op. cited, p. 266).
  10. Diary Cavallero.
  11. DSCS, f. 16261 Supermarina date 21/6/1942.
  12. J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 219.
  13. VOLKMAR KUHN, *Mit Rommel in der Wüste*, Motorbuch Verlag, Stuttgart 1975, 2nd ed. 14 v. KUHN, works cited. According to Student, on this occasion Hitler would decide: “*the attack against Malta won't be implemented in the year 1942.*”
- The same concepts were expressed by Student to Liddell Hart: “*alarmed hit Hitler [to unfavorable Crüwell report]. He was convinced that, if the British fleet had appeared on the scene, all the Italian ships were refugees in haste in their ports and were left in the lurch airborne forces. Decided to shelve the plan of attack of Malta*” (B.H. LIDDELL HART, *history of defeat*, Rizzoli, Milano 1979, p. 279).
15. A. MARTIENSSEN, op. cited above, p. 192.
  16. K. ASSMANN, op. cited above, p. 266.
  17. Letter 23.6.1942 of Hitler to Mussolini-Annex No. 21.
  18. E. Basnco, weekly time, no. 50, dated 9.12.1942, art. cited, pp. 26-29. VDS. Also G. MANCINELU, op. cited above, pp. 126-129.
  19. DSCSAS, tele 01/12024/Op. date 23.6.1942, at 10:45, deciphered in Rome at 15:10. This opportunity allows a clarification of topographical character. In all correspondence Italian - German it reads “Marsa Matruh” or even “Marsa Matruk”. This name is incorrect: the name is Matruh and Marsa Matruh is simply the little “port” in the Creek North of the town. Strangely, in the axis, both in Africa and in Rome or Berlin, taken base immediately used to indicate the location with the name of Marsa Matruh.
  20. DSCSAS, tele date 23.6.1942, 02:35 hours 12:00 of Mar. Kesselring, annex No. 22.
  21. DSCS, “Appreciation of the situation of the Libyan-Egyptian Theater on June 19-21”.
  22. E. VON RINTELEN, op. cited above, p. 160.
  23. DSCS, tele 31270/Op. date 23.6.1942, at 21:30, arrived at Comando Superiore on 24 June 03:30.



24. DSCSAS, tele 01/12026 Op. date 23.6.1942, 11:00; hours.
25. DSCSAS, tele 01/12028 Op. date 23.6.1942, at 12:20.
- 26 Given the absolute impossibility of trucking, were temporarily at Tobruk the 19<sup>th</sup> infantry and I/28<sup>th</sup> infantry.
27. Report of Gen. G. Lombardi on 20.6.1943 on “*Brescia Inf. Div. in the battle of Cyrenaica and Egypt (26 June-31 July 1942)*”.
28. Historical Journal X Corps, f. 4481/Op. date 24.6.1942.
- 29.DSCSAS, tele No. 3161, at 23:50 Col. Mancinelli.
30. DSCS, tele f. 31300/Op. date 26.6.1942- Annex No. 23.
31. Kesselring had preceded the Italian generals, desiring to speak face-to-face with Rommel. You do not know the content of this conversation, quoted in Cavallero’s diary, and probably in other places, which would explain the version of Bastico. It’s clear that had acquired full physiognomy friction between the two *Field Marshals*, so deemed already valid observation of Mancinelli that “(...) *each of the two German commanders considered with a certain distrust of intervention in discussions and operational decisions*”(G. Mancinelli, op. cited, p. 72).
32. Of the interview there is verbal. It was rebuilt on the base and as recalled by Bastico (No. 50 of the weekly time, 9.12.1958, pp. 26-29) and the summary appearing in Cavallero’s diary.
33. Diary Cavallero.
34. DSCS, tele 31303/Op. date 26.6.1942, 19:00 hour, transmitted at 23:29 and deciphered in Rome on 2-Annex 27 to no. 24.
35. DSCS, tele 31301/Op. date 26.6.1942, at 18:10: “For *general Magli - Tevere*”.
36. DSCS, tele 31306 /Op. date 27.6.1942.
37. DSCS, f. 31307/Op. date 27.6.1942.
- 38 .Cavallero Diary, letter 25.6.1942 of Marshal Keitel-Annex No. 25.
39. DSCS, f. 31310/Op. date 28.6.1942.
40. DSCS, f. 31316/Op. date 29.6.1942- Annex No. 26.
41. The judgment suffered numerous difficulties of converse Gen. Pienaar to gen. Gott about the tasks assigned by the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp to the 1<sup>st</sup> South African.
42. The *Desert Air Force* had 463 efficient aircraft and the *Royal Air Force* in the Middle East had another 420 efficient appliances.
43. J. CONNELL, op. cited above, pp. 594-595.
44. W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 439.
45. J. CONNELL, op. cited above, pp. 595-596.
46. *Ibid*, p. 597.
47. C. AUCHINLECK, Dispatch, p. 362.
48. F. H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, p. 389.
49. J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 597-598. The Gen. Galloway had been recalled to London from the Middle East to take an assignment of staff to the War Office.
50. *Ibid*, pp. 608-609.
51. On June 21 Gott had phoned Rees to keep the cornerstone of Sollum for three days. These retorted that the Division was being battered, and also considered the status of defensive features of the stronghold, had many and serious doubts of being able to carry out its task. Gott hung up the phone without retyping and six hours after he presented himself to Sollum. Furious, stretched a piece of paper to Rees and ordered to read it. Rees, appalled, read that, in the judgment of God, he did not possess the firmness required by circumstances and, therefore, had to cede the command immediately. Because, of course, a commander of the Corp did not have the authority to exempt a standing major general, the thing ended up in front of Auchinleck, who had to withstand Gott, despite having a high concept of Rees. He was placed in command of the defenses of the area of Cairo o. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 610).

52. *Ibid* pp. 598-600.
53. C. AUCHINLECK, Dispatch cit., p. 328.
54. "The 8<sup>th</sup> army -commented a witness to Matruh-poured back through us, without sounding completely demoralized, except for black South African drivers; but completely cluttered and disorganized. I saw only one organic combatant, both infantry, artillery or armored" (HOWARD KIPPENBERGER, Infantry Brigadier, Oxford University Press, London 1961, pp. 126-127).
55. C. BARNETT, op. cited above, p. 258.
56. J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 612.
57. However, in the afternoon of 22<sup>nd</sup> Churchill had discussed with Brooke of Ritchie's replacement. "I already knew that at any moment this would happen and there I was prepared" Brooke wrote in his diary, and by the time the thing was pending (A. BRYANT, op. cited, p. 388).
58. The letter shows with omissions other than J. CONNELL (op. cited, pp. 600-601) and W. CHURCHILL (op. cited, pp. 446-447). Here is rebuilt since comparing the two texts.
59. C. BARNETT, op. cited above, p. 265.
- 60.. I.S.O PLA YFAIR, op. cited above, p. 286.
61. J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 248.
62. J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 670.
63. Historical Journal of the 20th Corps, s.n. date 27.6.1942 message, at 13.40, arrived at 15:00.
- 64.J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 255.
65. Every New Zealand Battalion had eight 2 pounds pieces, which were to be replaced with 6 pounder guns. According to Kippenberger, right on the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> had come some 6 pounds, insufficient for the required total replacement (op. cited, p. 129). According to AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER, on the other hand, 6-Pounder pieces arrived was 40 (op. cited, p. 253).
66. *Ibid*, p. 255.
67. I.S.O PLA YFAIR, op. cited above, p. 292.
68. J.A.I AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, pp. 256-257.
- 69 *ibid.*, pp. 257-258.
70. E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 178. It noted that the events of the night on June 28 were referred to generally in a rough, even widely because of Rommel's version. The more attentive to an acceptable reconstruction are AGAR-HAMILTON and TURNER (op. cited, pp. 260-263).
71. H. KIPPENBERGER, op. cited above, p. 135.
72. J. A. I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F. TURNER, op. cited above, p. 259.
73. J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 619.
74. J.A.I AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 259.
75. J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 620.
- 76.. I.S.O PLA YFAIR, op. cited above, p. 294.
77. B. PITT describes part (Italian, of course) of the events: "As a result, the West, the Italians found themselves suddenly overwhelmed by the British retreat, although they lost little time taking prisoners but pushed on [to quit] leaving the Italians enter Matruh as desired; While to the East developed some harsh actions etc.» (op. cited, p. 127).  
Now, no British Division attacked to the West, on the front of the 21st Italian Corps.
78. E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 180.
- 79 historical Diaries X and XX Corps.
80. The *Littorio* had at that the time the division command, 12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiment with three battalions (including one anti-tank), 133<sup>rd</sup> infantry tank regiment with the LI tank battalion 13/40 M, I/133<sup>rd</sup> with only three artillery pieces of 75/27, III group squadrons of *Lanceri di Novara* with only one L 6 tank Squadron, II group from 100/17 artillery 21<sup>st</sup> *Trieste*. Were still marching toward Matruh the XII tank battalion M 14/41 and two squadrons of *Novara*.

81. It is curious to read that after passing El Daba (by the author confused with El Douda) the *Littorio* “*announced suddenly (...) that the enemy was completely dispersed and that's not the only one tank was more because they had made everyone explode*” (H. G. von ESEBECK, *Rommel and the Afrika Korps*, Payot, Paris, 1950, pp. 101-102).
82. Report of Gen. Lombardi about the operations of the *Brescia* Inf. Div
83. F. von MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 156.
84. AA.VV., *Storia della seconda guerra mondiale*, Rizzoli and Purnell, Milano, 1967 III vol., p. 171.
85. F. von MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 154.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

## Chapter Seven

### THE FIRST BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

#### 1. THE INITIAL ITALIAN-GERMAN BREAKTHROUGH ATTEMPT (JULY 1-4)

If Rommel's unexpected rapid advance had precipitated in the 8th Army in a serious crisis and public opinion in Cairo in an alarmed concern, one cannot really talk about panic and demoralization. The measures taken were drastic though. In Cairo the Commander in Chief prepares to move to Gaza, in southern Palestine, and began to burn the Office correspondence<sup>(1)</sup>, proceeded to the study of demolition to be implemented, beginning with the development of defensive works of a barrier of the operating axis to a advance on the capital, arrange the evacuation to the East of the Delta of the whole logistics organization. As for the Mediterranean Fleet, warships needed to fight in the Mediterranean were divided between Haifa and Beirut, Port Said and the remainder was transferred to the South of the channel, while the naval Commander in Chief moved to Ismailia. The *Royal Air Force* finally had to return to Palestine medium and heavy bombers.

Among the civilians were major events: the bag had a black moment, University students showed considerable agitation, hundreds and hundreds of people rushed to leave for Sudan, Palestine and South Africa, the two cities of Alexandria and Cairo strongly appeared restless. But all that lasted a few days.

On 28 June, at 20:00, Auchinleck had provided to the head of the I.G.S.G. an appreciation of the situation very realistic, although based on an estimate of the Italian-German forces greater than real:

“1. The enemy in the western desert enjoys a much greater availability of tanks than the 8th Army. Given the lack of natural barriers to mechanized movement and the ease with which a force more equipped with tanks is able to get around the desert flank of any location, except *for* the line El Alamein-Qattara depression, armored vehicles remain the main factor for the preservation of the initiative.

2. The enemy. Got all the recent successes with its three German divisions. The Italians played a minor role. His tactics was excellent and his adherence to principles, rapid movement and skill in being able to supply advanced troops, was even more remarkable.

Its leaders are well trained and know how to react in situations that usually occur in battle (...).

So far, what we know, it is unlikely that the enemy receives much

more in terms of means and men, but the hope of conquering Egypt can lead to a diversion of forces from Russia.

On the other hand, his maritime communications with Libya are momentarily becoming precarious and he is always struggling with the lack of one or the other material. The occupation of Egypt greatly facilitate the resolution of his problems. His ability to advance supply, where troops trying to advance towards the Delta, cannot be exactly determined, however he has already done great things and has captured many of our vehicles, so we have to prepare ourselves for this eventuality.

3. Objective. Our goal is to be at all costs to prevent the enemy blocking our supplies to ports in the Red Sea before we have adequate armored force composition to regain the initiative and begin the counteroffensive. Likewise, it is essential to prevent it from increasing his armored units in Libya and this implies the maximum effort against his maritime communication routes.

4. Maritime Communications. The preservation of Malta and Alexandria, and most airports in Egypt is very important if we are to seriously disrupt the enemy supply conduit with Libya.

5. Air Force. We cannot resume the ground offensive until we bring back the armored forces to the necessary level. In the meantime, our only option offense is the air combat force, which is essential to maintain the highest degree of efficiency as the sole to allow some initiative.

6. Understandings. It is my intention, in full agreement with the Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force, to preserve the 8th Army in the complex mobile field condition and resist at all costs to any enemy attempt to proceed further to the East.

7. Mode:

a. require the enemy as much as possible without slowing down that this involves the encirclement or destruction of the army, on the line of Fuka and then El Alamein positions;

b. where the retreat from El Alamein to becomes unavoidable, the 8th Army (minus the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division) withdrawing along the “track of barrels”, from Deir el Qattara to Cairo, and would continue to deal with the enemy when trying to turn on Cairo. The 1st South African Division, currently deployed in the defense of El Alamein area, would retire on Alexandria.

c. the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division, the 9th Australian Division and the forces and columns in course of formation in the Delta, will form the *Delta Force* under Gen. Stone, who will be responsible for defense of the western edge of the Delta, stepper resistance against the enemy if he penetrates into the Delta and the defense of Alexandria;

d. If the enemy moves along the coast in the direction of Alexandria, the 8th Army will attack his southern flank and rear. If move on Cairo, the *Delta Force* will attack his northern flank and rear;

e. in this meantime will constitute the impact force ready to launch a counter-offensive along the track of barrels or the coastal road or along both, according to the situation;

f. If driven from positions of El Alamein, I'll take direct control of both the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the *Delta Force*, a tactical Command of circumstances outside Cairo. Lieutenant General Corbett will lead the 8<sup>th</sup> Army<sup>(2)</sup>”.

Just returned from England, Gen. Brooke was absolutely unexpected prospects ahead: in Russia, began the great summer offensive on 23 June, German army groups had broken the Soviet front; in Africa Rommel's army was rushing to Cairo. Of course the latter circumstance was more worrisome: *"The situation in the Middle East -he observed- couldn't be more desperate and do not know precisely how it will finish"*<sup>(3)</sup>. At the meeting of 29 June had to make do with Ernest Bevin, the Minister of Labour, that poses the *"rude and nagging questions on the situation in the Middle East, continuously questioning me on issues I'd just explained"*, which induced him to comment that was from *"send off the rails on having to listen to people who had no idea how to deal with the situation and that spew fantastic theories as if they were the great masters of the past in the art of war"*<sup>(4)</sup>.

Who however was to bear the brunt of the tension was Churchill. On 25 June, while he was still in the United States, a prominent conservative MP, Sir John Wardlaw-Milne, had submitted a motion to the municipalities is nothing short of scorching: *"this Chamber, pays tribute to the heroism and tenacity of the Imperial armed forces engaged in situations of exceptional difficulty, claims not to have any confidence in the direction of the war."* Now Churchill was preparing for the debate, set for July 1.

It is worth to detect as the defeat at Gazala, the unexplained fall of Tobruk, the disordered retreat of the remnants of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army to Egypt, the heavy losses in men and material, the looming danger to the Canal everything was not charged to those who fought in the desert – as is usually done by politicians-but the war's political leadership. The principle of real and concrete responsibility of political organ responsible for the strategic use of the armed forces had any prize and possible errors by military leaders in the field. Not only that, but when the resonance announce public debate made clear the odds of a deep political crisis with inevitable repercussions of military character, Wardlaw-Milne offered to withdraw the motion, where the gravity of the situation in Egypt had made a broad public discussion ill-timed. Churchill, who attributed the gesture, was not going to prevent deterioration in the performance of military operations in the Middle East, but the fear of his opponents to get defeated by the challenge to coalition Government refused, considering necessary clarification because of the clamor now aroused by the initiative throughout the world. Among other things, decided to announce the assumption of direct command of the 8<sup>th</sup> army by Auchinleck<sup>(5)</sup>.

Moreover, the criticism made by the public were set and founded and were very well summarized by Sir Stafford Cripps, lord Privy Seal, in a personal report developed for the *Prime Minister*:

“(…) 1. Journalistic correspondence characterized to be overoptimistic.

It is true that these matches are not official in any aspect, but they are not necessarily of the information supplied to the press from military authorities, whose general tenor was such as to induce corresponding to give a picture of the situation too optimistic, but there has been no official statement that attempted to offset the effect. He derived the impression that military authorities do not realize the seriousness of the situation accurately and that the military intelligence service was not accurate enough and had misled our commanders involved in the battle. The generality of these correspondences has undoubtedly helped make much more severe blow of the loss of Tobruk and the retreat on Mersa Matruh.

2. Work of the Generals. It is the widespread opinion that with best commanders Rommel could be defeated, especially in the critical moment, according to General Auchinleck was forced to deplete his reserves. It is generally believed that there has been a deficiency of commanders and that the whole campaign has been overly inspired by the concept of defensive action, without the necessary energy to counterattack at the decisive moment.

This criticism has led to the suspicion that both the Commander-in-Chief as Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army does not have a precise idea of the tactics and strategy of modern warfare by mechanical means and the need to make radical changes in commands, giving you now the responsibility to more experienced men and with more mechanized war attitudes.

3. Commander-in-Chief. The criticism expressed in point 2. Make the doubt even more serious that the Commander in Chief even if he exceeded and unable to assess the best way to fight Rommel and his troops. Associated with this question is the impression that cooperation between ground forces and those of the air has not been as effective as he could and that there is still a lack of cooperation and strategic preparation at the center.

4. Weapons. Perhaps the most bitter criticism is one that insists that after nearly three years of war we are still less than basic weapons such as tanks and anti-tank pieces and this defeat is largely due to that inferiority.

5. Research and inventions. Widespread opinion is that although you have in our country of skilled researchers, has failed, for one reason or another, to adequately exploit such ability in the race to produce more efficient weapons and that we should undertake some organizational innovation to take full advantage of this important aspect of the war effort.

6. Aviation. People can't understand how anyone can say, according to statements by General Auchinleck, which we were able to maintain moral superiority in the air, when at the same time we are unable to stop the advancing enemy. This creates doubts about the availability of effective and aircraft has again raised the whole issue of dive bombers and other problems,

including the types of aircraft. In the latter connection, there is a concern that the ideas of the designers are too rigid and that such rigidity prevents us, despite having air superiority to obtain the same results as the enemy attacks from the air.

Was also raised the issue of interception of the reinforcements that flow to the enemy in Libya, and wondered if we cannot make a greater use of aircraft of great autonomy, in view of our naval weakness in the Mediterranean.

The above summarizes, in my opinion, the reasons for greater concern for most pensive spirits of the country”<sup>(6)</sup>.

Who knows what thoughts would be the case if Mussolini, *mutatis mutandis*\*, a similar report had arrived on his table as Head of Government, Minister of War, Minister of the Navy, Minister of the Air Force, Supreme Commander of the troops operating on all fronts, all positions which he had demanded and which he had for years!

El Alamein (Arabic: the two signals) is a small railway station at Gulf of Arabs, between Alexandria and Matruh. In line by air is from the latter one hundred kilometers, as Rommel to his exultant evening of 30 June, and two hundred and thirty from Cairo. Further South, at about 60 kilometers, the great depression: an immense area impassable, covered with progressively shifting sands and salty marshes, attaining in the central part the 180 meters below sea level. Shaped like a hunting horn with the mouthpiece to the Northeast, in practice at El Alamein, and the wing (large over 140 kilometers) to the Southwest, just east of the Siwa Oasis.

Between the depression and the coast, in closed terrain by meridians of Sidi Abd el Rahman and El Imayid (respectively in the West and to the East of El Alamein), there is the battlefield where it broke Axis dreams and vanished Britain's fears.

The combination of humps, of about 200-250 meters, which border the depression in the North as a ridge line, the terrain gradually descends to the sea without substantial changes and has no significant obstacles to utilization. Natural elements worth mentioning are the *deir*, shallow sinkholes of various sizes; the *tell*, humps of low elevation, and some rocky ridges (*ridges*) tend to parallel performance, partly covered by free sand, up to a few kilometers from the coast. Only the latter were tactical significance to the foothold that could offer such a static defense: el Miteiriya, el Ruweisat Alam el Halfa and. The last two gave the name to the first two battles of El Alamein.

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\**Latin*: the things being changed which need to be changed



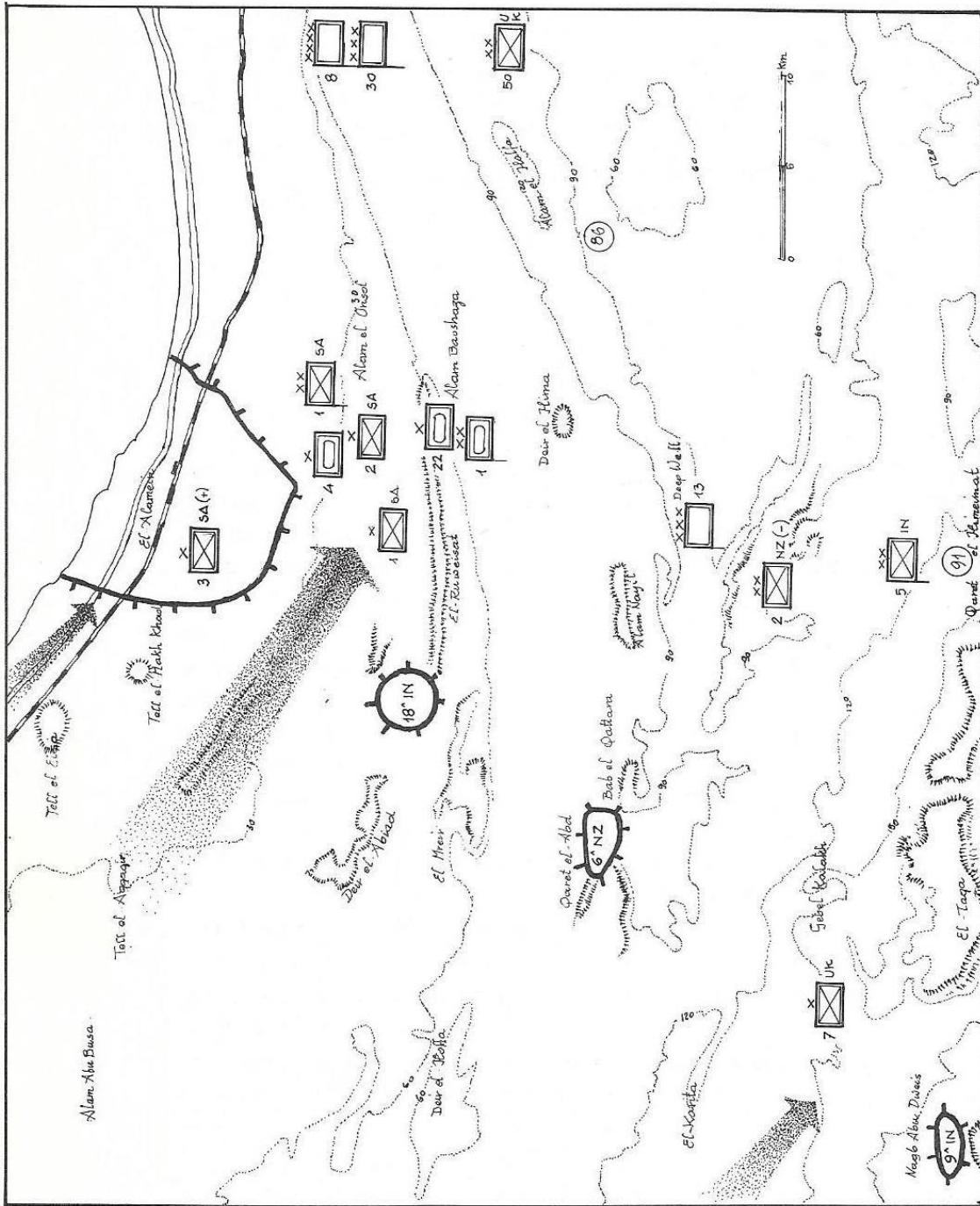
The defensive value of the narrows of El Alamein had been spotted in the spring of 1941 by Gen. Marshall-Cornwall, then commanding British troops in Egypt, and materialized in the preparation of three “defended areas” or *boxes*: one around the El Alamein station, one at Bab el Qattara depression (or Qaret el Abd), roughly halfway between the railroad and the depression, and the third at Naqb Abu Dweis, a passage for the roadway on the step edge of the depression (sketch No. 52).

El Alamein had meaning for the station and the origin of two tracks: the track towards Qattara red (because red cards shown in the British military at the time) to Naqb Abu Dweis, and the track of the water (because it lined with a water pipe), which before El Ruweisat you once branched on Bâb el Qattara depression-Naqb Abu Dweis Southwest Qaret el Himeimat and South. The three areas were not certain defenses in the system, given that between one and the other ran about thirty kilometers, they qualify as true «positions». In essence, it was the summary framework of a position of strength. In June 1942 the three boxes were still incomplete as work and passive defense and took a feverish work to bring them to a satisfactory degree of efficiency, but the main problems were fixed by Gen. Norrie where the 23 June took command of the line, were the garrison of the *boxes* and the barrier of the two large existing dividers between them.

On balance, he found only the 1st South African Division of Gen. Pienaar, stationed at El Alamein. From 28 June began arriving units. The 18th Indian Brigade, coming from Iraq, it received the task to hold the newly created position of Deir el Shein, on the western fringes of Ruweisat, and then halfway between El Alamein and the Bab el Qattara depression. In the latter locality is deployed the 6th New Zealand Brigade, to whose flanks were to settle out the 4th and the 5th Brigade, returning from the stormy Minqar Qaim affair. The Naqb Abu Dweis *box* was occupied by the 9th Indian brigade. Such was the situation when, after the disaster of Matruh, Auchinleck decided to activate the line.

On 29 June the Commander-in-Chief visited the position of resistance. Fed the belief that the opponent was short of breath, but also knew, from eavesdropping, that Rommel had ordered the attack on the “*new positions*” as soon as possible<sup>(7)</sup>. However insisted in the determination not to accept a fight to the bitter end. “*Under no circumstances*”-he signaled to London-*I admit that the 8th Army might be surrounded and immobilized.*” Such conviction stemmed from some directives that consequential, gave rise

## The British deployment to El Alamein on 10 July



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to misinterpretation and uncertainties. First of all the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps command, now redundant given the presence of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>, was sent back to organize the defense of the Delta. Secondly, Norrie and Gott were provisions for the conduct of the retreat, which had made it necessary to abandon El Alamein: the South Africans would have withdraw on Alexandria and the rest of the army on the Wadi Natrun, about 70 kilometers Northwest of Cairo. Thirdly, the ordering of the divisions was adapted to the criterion of combat groups based on average on a battalion of infantry, two campaign batteries, one anti-tank battery, and one anti-aircraft, a machine-gun company and units of engineering and services. Anything that's not served at the garrison of the *boxes* or the establishment of the aforementioned combat groups had to be sent back.

So, the 3<sup>rd</sup> South African Brigade with 1<sup>st</sup> South African field artillery and the British 1st Heavy artillery held the *box* of the field of El Alamein; While the combat group of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade and the 2<sup>nd</sup> were on the northern slopes of Ruweisat. The remainder of the Division was sent to Alexandria to form the *Scrubbforce*, responsible for the defense of the port, together with the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division sent to the Delta ten companies and 18<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade two battalions. The remains of the British 50<sup>th</sup> Division were located to the East of Alam el Halfa, divided into three columns. As for the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division, the 4th and 22nd Armored Brigade were to reorganize to the Northeast and Southeast of Ruweisat; the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade stop between Bab el Qattara and Naqb Abu Dweis.

As it is easy to imagine, this order shakeup could not avoid criticism and puzzlement. Gen. Gott, who hid series apprehensions, was convinced that the evacuation of Egypt was inevitable and that New Zealanders even if they are returned home. Among other things, in a brief conversation with General Kippenberger expressed strong doubts about the combativeness of Pienaar. Ultimately, he "*feared the worst*"<sup>(8)</sup>. Gen. Norrie, however, saw things differently. In his opinion El Alamein was the last resort and there was the possibility of arresting the *Panzerdivisionen*, reduced to a shadow of themselves. Therefore, it seemed clear to Auchinleck to fight on the spot. As you can see, none of the two major subordinates of Auchinleck had understood the operating design of the Commander in Chief.

The morale of the troops was, all in all, decent. There is no doubt that recent events have left more of a mark, but,

at least according to qualified players, it was not distrust of leaders. It was instead consolidating a trend already surfaced earlier and become more pronounced during the battle of Gazala: mutual accusations among the various arms. It is to note, partly unavoidable, heterogeneity in the British army as a whole; However, one particular aspect was done on purpose to provoke friction. The commanders, the Staffs and armored units were all British and this lit rivalries and suspicions, especially as the all-too-obvious gaps in cooperation between the infantry, artillery and tanks had provoked serious misunderstanding and exchanges of charges<sup>(9)</sup>. Since then the divisions of Dominions, the mistrust of the command-in-Chief and vice versa was fueled also by hesitation on the use of these units by the respective Governments. Reflections like mood came of course to London and created a new problem.

To complete the picture of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army at the end of June you should mention his articulation. All the forces charged with static or elastic defense were framed in the 30<sup>th</sup> Corps of Norrie: 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division, 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade. The units at hand for dynamic reaction belonged to Gott's 13<sup>th</sup> Corp: 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division (less the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade), 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division and 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade<sup>(10)</sup>.

News on Axis forces seemed to indicate the intention of Rommel to push the bulk of the *Panzerarmee* toward Naqb Abu Dweis to breakthrough in the extreme South and then go northeast to turn the entire 8<sup>th</sup> Army. In the night of June 30 was deciphered another *Enigma* message: Rommel would attack at 15:00 of the 30<sup>th</sup> with substantial air support, developing a demonstration against the action of the El Alamein *box* before noon. Remained the uncertainty of the gravitation of the forces, however, was already and immediately Auchinleck had issued to all hierarchical levels a short note:

"The enemy has extended to the extreme limit and believes that we are a joke army. His tactics against the New Zealanders was absolutely ineffective. He hopes to take Egypt with a *bluff*. Let us show him that he is wrong"<sup>(11)</sup>.

Then ordered the completion of defensive measures, having regard to the possibility of the Italian-German offensive "*at any time midday onwards*".<sup>(12)</sup>

Among these measures was the urgent recovery of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division of Lumsden, whose columns were withdrawing without losing the chance to deal a blow to Axis divisions

which were mostly interspersed, even if only to slow the progression. So, as we know, even on the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup> the 7th Motorized Brigade, reinforced with armored vehicles and artillery, attacked XX Corp making him lose all morning. At the same time a mechanized column suddenly opened fire on the *Littorio*, it suffered serious damage in a brief clash, and in the afternoon, it was the turn of the DAK. But such intense activity, together with the discomfort of walking on land to be infamous and amid frequent sand storms, had provoked a sharp tear in the British. The 1st Armored Division was able to regain the position of 8th Army with fatigue. The command of the Division, lost their orientation, spent the night of 1 July on the El Mreir; the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade remained with 28 tanks, 10 of which in tow, gathered in the darkness South of El Alamein, by chance escaping the fire of the 3<sup>rd</sup> South African Brigade; the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade to that still had some forty tanks, he decided to remain until the first light of dawn of 1 July in Tell el Aqqaqir, a few miles southwest of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light; the 7th Motorized Brigade was further South, also waiting for dawn.

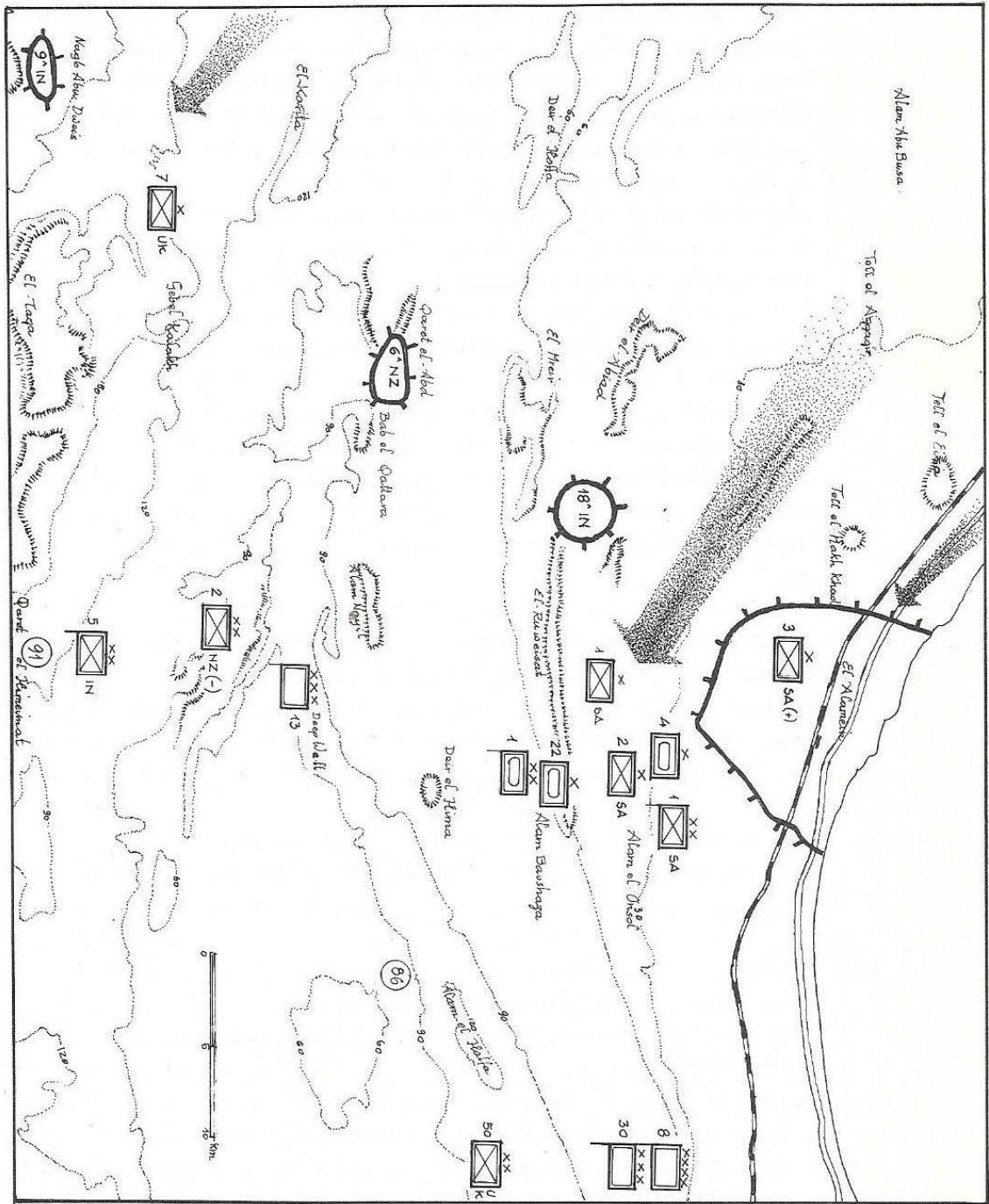
More *Enigma* messages decryptions, always through *Luftwaffe* communications, made known the forced postponement of the start of Rommel's attack, allowed the relocation of some units of the axis, revealed the direction of attack of 15th *Panzer*, given notice of the incursion of *Luftwaffe* bombers<sup>(13)</sup>. On this basis, Auchinleck was prepared to face the main German-Italian effort between El Alamein and Bab el Qattara, tending to insulate the *box* of El Alamein, as had been done at Matruh and secondary efforts against the predicted *box* and the area south of Bab el Qattara.

According to the latest reconstruction made by the *Panzerarmee*, the British on 30 June was as follows: to the North the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp with the British 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. in El Alamein and the 10th Indian Inf. Bd. at Deir el Abyad, i.e. West of Deir el Shein. to the South the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp with the 2nd New Zealand Inf. Div. in the zone of Bab el Qattara and the 5th Indian Inf. Div. at Naqb Abu Dweis. The limit of the sector seemed to be correct North of Bab el Qattara. The 1st Arm. Div. It was held in front of the sector of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp (sketch No. 53).

As a result, upon completion of an initial extremely terse order issued at 11:30 in the afternoon Rommel provided to give individually verbal arrangements. Those for Navarini, convened shortly after noon, are summarized in the historical diary of XXI Corps:

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"The enemy has his defense system between the coast and the Qattara depression at the point where this goes more to the North, i.e. up to El Alamein; There, on a line greatly fortified and secured, not likely to bypass, he intends to oppose the last resistance to bar the road of Alexandria.

The army will start the front line enemy breakthrough at 03:00 hours of the night between June 30 and July 1 in order to annihilate the central strongpoints and begin turning northwards of the El Alamein and Southwards of the stronghold that rests at the Qattara depression.

The XXI Corps tasked to surround and attack the stronghold of El Alamein: the 90<sup>th</sup> Light Div. to attack the enemy and points North to complete the bypass: behind it will advance the XXI Corp units, which are designed to attack El Alamein from South to North.

The X and the XX Corp similar maneuver will take place against the southern stronghold, while C. T. A. be held ready to chase the enemy eastward through the open gate"».

If you ignore the sequence given, however orders sketch compiled from *Panzerarmee* maneuver design appears to be configured quite differently. Probably this is the conclusion after some adaptation. In essence, Rommel set out to break into the void between El Alamein and Deir el Abyad with the 90<sup>th</sup> Light and the DAK. The first was to turn the coastal stronghold from the South and reach the coast road; the second was to penetrate Southeast, crossing the Ruweisat and go even farther south to reach Qaret el Himeimat, behind the British 13<sup>th</sup> Corp. The portion reserved for Italians was to engage the front of static structures on either side of the break, namely El Alamein (part of XXI Corps) and Deir el Abyad (part of X Corps); "line" corridor of penetration of German forces to ensure their safety, with the *Trento* facing north and *Brescia* at Deir el Shein; follow a arm much shorter maneuver of the DAK and occupy Bab el Qattara (XX Corps). The *Littorio* had to check the English 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division. A preliminary bid of a tactical group of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* towards Naqb Abu Dweis to would help to generate erroneous impressions in the enemy. Unlike the design at Matruh, here the whole mass of maneuver was focused and driven with short reins.

As mentioned above, Auchinleck was aware of the plan. Would therefore submit to Rommel two contingencies: the penetration of German mass was destined to meet before the combat groups of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> South African Brigade, then the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division; the direction of attack would have found the 18<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade

at Deir el Shein. In other words, instead of attacking with strong on weak, to use an expression in armed combat, Rommel would attack with strong on ... stronger, prepared to deal with it. The reality is going to be different, but not by much.

Anyway, apart from the inconveniences arising from a hurried collection of news on the enemy, a particular especially perplexing: Rommel wanted to gather by the late evening of the 30<sup>th</sup> a breakthrough mass to the East of Tell el Aqqaqir and begin the attack at 03:00 of 1 July so that the DAK, whose route was longer, was found at dawn between Deir el Munassib and Qaret el Himeimat. But how could the DAK go more than 50 miles in three hours, at night, in a strange land, encountering at least some mines, facing at least some opponent counter attacks?

We also calculate the opposing forces, as would appear to *Panzerarmee*: around 55 Germans medium tanks and 70 Italians, 330 German guns and 200 Italians (including in some fifty pieces of 25 pounds of war booty), 15 armored cars, 2,000 German infantry and 8,000 Italians. In short, the artillery was noticeable but not exceptional, the infantry was limited and tired and efficient tanks were few (although their availability may vary significantly depending upon repairs). The little or much, in and of itself, has no practical meaning unless it is compared with the host the opponent, but it does not appear that the *Panzerarmee* attempted to translate into figures the consistency of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. The watchword, so to speak, was be *remnants*, beaten and discouraged, and Rommel was designed to address the most fearsome unit-the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand and 1<sup>st</sup> Armored-in favor, namely for bottling of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp concluded. In fact, the army had not less than 15,000 infantry, 400 guns, 150 tanks and 100 armored cars.

“In relation to our experience of Matruh-supported von Mellenthin-I think this plan offer a real hope of victory. The German forces were too weak for any hard fight, but still able to maneuver. It is therefore possible that if Rommel had brought his divisions through the British backline, would throw the enemy once more into Stampede”<sup>(14)</sup>.

Anything can happen in war, but seems to be some doubt about the reality of such an operational design.

The resumption of the Italian-German offensive was an attempt to continue the march on Cairo. Momentum ran out in three days, but it took a number of initiatives on both sides, in order to obtain benefits



consistent with local action. Will end on 14 July and will mark a time of important strategic decisions.

From 15 to 17, the British army, believing the balance reached, passed to the counteroffensive, trying the success at Ruweisat. For just failed to win the victory of El Alamein. Partly thanks to the energy of the axis and counterattacks to demerit of the British command, the purpose was not achieved.

After a few days, on 22 July, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army attacked with violence still straddling the Ruweisat. The Italian-German troops resisted and rejected the effort, though the attrition was tremendous. Much to induce Auchinleck to make another attempt, the 27<sup>th</sup>, this time to the northeast of Ruweisat. After the third failure "*the British Command moved to perform other attacks*" commented Rommel<sup>(15)</sup>.

Let's start from the initial move of Rommel.

## JULY 1<sup>st</sup>

In the early hours of the morning the units of British 1st Armored Division made their move. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade went on the eastern end of Ruweisat, the Division also moved into that area and the 7th motorized brigade moved North- East of Naqb Abu Dweis. All these movements were carried out without incident, nor indeed of which exist the danger. Quite different is the case of the 4th Armored Brigade. Not only had rested a few hours walking distance from 90<sup>th</sup> Light, but the staging location coincided precisely with the collection area which was moving the DAK. It was doubly lucky because the 90<sup>th</sup> Light went on the attack without noticing its presence and the DAK, put terribly uncomfortable from a difficult ground conditions in its night approach to Tell el Aqaqir, suddenly found himself with two *Panzerdivisionen* so stir it to navigate and find they gave a colorful series of signal rockets. So the Corp arrived in the area with three hours of delay. The 4th Brigade was able to take shelter within the British lines, while incurring in any final misadventure. At first it was involved from the fire of the 3<sup>rd</sup> South African Brigade against the simultaneous penetration of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, then, reached Alam el Onsol, it's transport buried in the sand and the for much of the day was unable to act.

At 04:30 the 90<sup>th</sup> Light surpassed red track, but things began badly, because, immediately finding itself in front of the southwest edge of the defensive perimeter of El Alamein and arrested by an intense barrage and nearby interdiction is immobilized and also halted was the *Trento*, which was placed in its wake (sketch No. 54). At 08:00 the 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, IE the rest of the XXI Corps, faced the western sector of El Alamein, proceeding to the coastal road, but due to its lack of consistency was simply too much to engage the defenders.

As if that weren't enough, a heavy English air raid -one of many-the DAK, who finally prepared to enter the field, led to the full German mishaps. Despite the constant urging of Rommel, only at 06:45 Nehring could start to maneuver. As for the XX Corp.<sup>(16)</sup>, at approximately 10:00 it left the Abu Alam Busat area, where it had spent the night, to bring in Tell el Eisa and be able to sustain the DAK and the X Corps.

But meanwhile the 15th Panzer, enveloping movement southward, had met the first hurdle: the strongpoint of Deir el Shein. It was not expected and Nehring was for a moment in doubt whether to ignore it and go on, continuing to the agreed upon objectives. Understood that this was not a matter of little account (the 18th Indian Brigade had artillery and nine *Matilda*), solved by eliminating it. Rommel, soon turned up, approved the decision, starting with a request for surrender, which of course was rejected. Was clearly resigned to reconnaissance, especially of minefields, but the time allowed for the arrival of the 21st *Panzer*.

It was midday and the sandstorm that was raising allowed the 90<sup>th</sup> Light to escape the fire still alive of the El Alamein *box* and continue, while the 21st *Panzer* set to eliminate Deir el Shein. Satisfied, Rommel signaled Gioda: "*the attack of the army goes well. In the afternoon you intent to chase the enemy eastward. The X Corps immediately throws a Division in the area ... [Deir el Abyad]*"<sup>(17)</sup> and at 14:10 to Navarini: "*enemy's positions were broken at (...). The C.T.A. is attacking?.) heading south-southwest. The 90<sup>th</sup> Light (...) to the Northeast. XXI Corps must extend the right wing (...)*"<sup>(18)</sup>.

That times were skipped was already obvious, but the absence of a dynamic reaction was still hope. It is true that the existence of the cornerstone of Deir el Shein was a surprise; It is true that the presence of the 1st South African Brigade behind the 21st *Panzer* was a hassle, but it could still be unexpected that always stands in the battle.

GLI AVVENIMENTI DEL 1° LUGLIO

[illegible]

At 16:00 Mancinelli reported to the Comando Superiore that the 90<sup>th</sup> Light had already started the converting to the Northeast, while the DAK was slowed by other static structures on the left flank. However, provisions were given to the XX Corps and the *Littorio* was held ready to go in pursuit, it had to be pushed up to 20 km from Alexandria. Apart from the fuel situation of Italian divisions, the circumstances were a bit more complex. The 90<sup>th</sup> Light not only continued to be under fire of the El Alamein *box*, but went on to run even in those of the 1st and 2nd South African Brigade, so after a few kilometers was forced to stop in a painful state of disorganization. Neither much help could come from the 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri which, although supported by the 3<sup>rd</sup> rapid artillery and by a group of 105, obtained on the Western side of the defense area a limited successes due to intense enemy artillery fire.

The *Brescia* would go to Deir el Abyad but, like many other units, was literally captive of the sand West of Tell el Aqqaqir. If the tanks had suffered similar terrain, vehicles were much worse. Around noon Gen. Lombardi warned Gioda who spoke of releasing vehicles before another six hours. In fact, only in the late evening the Division could also align the vehicle on a hard ground, on the back of the positions. On the other hand, at Deir el Shein the 18<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade was on the ropes.

At 17:30 Rommel personally intervened to resolve what loomed as an embarrassing setback. He took the led of his Army echelon and *Kampfstaffel* Kiehl to strengthen German wedge, but not even his direct stimulus succeeded in realizing a shock force to break through the barrier of the Anglo-South African artillery, especially as the *Royal Air Force* thought well to intervene yet another time. And, as far as the Axis fighter by restoring some aerial equilibrium, the situation came to crystallize.

Also because Auchinleck had decided the intervention of the 1st Armored Division. Truly the first order, given to Gen. Lumsden at 13:20, remained without any effect: the 4th Armored Brigade was employed in freeing the tanks trapped in the sand and the 22nd numbered 18 efficient tanks. They were, indeed, a considerable help for the 18th Indian Brigade, except the armored cars sent in probably erred by conducting reconnaissance and returned asserting that at Deir el Shein everything was quiet. Thus the 22nd Brigade didn't budge. At 16:30 Auchinleck issued a new order and this time the Brigade intervened, going to fall right on the rear of the 15th *Panzer*, South of

Ruweisat. In the confusion that ensued, the British saw tank escape a few hundred Indians from Deir el Shein and believed to have carried out the task. So they returned to the starting point. Actually the 18<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, already partly being overwhelmed, finally surrendered at 19:00.

At 20:00 Rommel ordered the troops penetrated into the British defensive system to organize themselves to defend the positions reached. According to reports from Mancinelli, always in close contact, the judgment on the situation was favorable:

“Fail to provide further details -he cabled the Comando Superiore. Overall it can be said that the breakthrough of the opposing position is fully managed and the open the road East for further advance. Tomorrow we will continue operations to eliminate the El Alamein pocket. It is believed likely instead that the enemy forces now deployed to the South of the breaking point move away at night to the South & East (...)”<sup>(19)</sup>.

Navarini was less confident. The XXI Corp historical diary registers the fact that even the DAK had been able to achieve the expected results in its movement towards Southeast: *“the wedge that the army formed in between the enemy stronghold north [El Alamein] and the southern stronghold [Deir el Shein] has not been pushed up to close behind the enemy strongholds.”*

Rommel had to feel antsy. *“The road to Alexandria- he wrote - was supposed to be opened as soon as possible. By the hour, the British became stronger in the sector threatened”* <sup>(20)</sup>. Abruptly ordered the poor 90<sup>th</sup> Light to break through to the coastal road in the light of the moon. It was a useless and bloody attempt. The British fire barrier made a summary failure of the move.

South of Bab el Qattara calm ruled throughout the day. Auchinleck had originally planned to call some columns well equipped with artillery to fire against the enemy's exposed flank that had attacked Deir el Shein, but the measure, put in place by 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division at about 14:30, resulted in a raid into the void by the battle group sent northward.

The fall of night the two opponents tried to take stock of the first day of the battle.

Auchinleck judged *“unfavorable”* not the result, admitted the German-Italian *“temporary penetration”* at the stronghold of Deir el Shein and emphasized success (which was considered) of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade. In his view, according to his telegraph to London, the next day there was to expect recurrence of a major effort between El Alamein and Bab el Qattara, in the direction of El Imaid.

As a result, we confirmed the intention of blocking the penetration with the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp and counter-attack decisively from the South and Southeast with units of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp. But first disseminated more specific orders to wait for Rommel's move. To support the serenity of Auchinleck two notes probably contributed. The first, provided by two officers taken prisoners by the DAK and escaped during the fighting at Deir el Shein, showed the consistency of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* at 37 efficient tanks and in the 15<sup>th</sup> less than 17; the second, resulting from decryption of *Enigma* messages, showed that the *Royal Air Force* raids were pretty darn heavy for Axis divisions, causing losses, problems and delays in travel. “*The Desert Air Force hovered on the battlefield*” confirm von Mellenthin <sup>(21)</sup>.

Rommel was prey to mixed feelings. On the one hand he was unaware of the growing, although slow, strengthening of the opponent; on the other hand could not overlook some good news: Auchinleck had dismissed Ritchie, then there was a crisis of command; the *Mediterranean Fleet* had dislodged from Alexandria, and there were significant concerns over the development of the Axis offensive; Mussolini had arrived in Libya, then there was hope for a strong impulse on supplies from Italy; Battle of Deir el Shein had got 2,000 prisoners and 30 British guns (but caused the loss of 18 *Panzer*); the only enemy counter-attack was enough to worry. He concluded that “*the British do not seemed to have more self-confidence and, it seemed, preparing for a retreat*” and therefore resolved to persevere in the search for a solution by force in the short term, “*firmly convinced that a breakthrough on the part of my troops would spread panic in enemy ranks*”<sup>(22)</sup>.

Von Mellenthin, instead, observed wistfully that hopes of winning vanished precisely on July 1<sup>st</sup>. Remained, the only card to play yet, a counter-maneuver, but unfortunately the army was allowing himself to be entangled in a battle of attrition and the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division of Lumsden had received the great gift of an entire day to reorganize<sup>(23)</sup>.

The first incident took place even before the new day arising: an aerial bombardment that threw the DAK into disorder, especially in its services, and put on his knees the *Trieste*, torching or vandalizing sixty of his already poor vehicles. “*All the Division - reported De Stefanis to the Comando Superiore -can carry a reinforced company with part of the mortars for each regiment*”<sup>(24)</sup>. Serious consequences, they would feel for a few days.

In the afternoon, at 16:30, Mussolini summoned Cavallero to Berta for his promotion to Marshal of Italy. The measure was in the air, but an interesting background.

On June 21 the Duce had announced the surrender of Tobruk following the surrender offer is made to the Commander of the XXI Corps for arousing the feeling of a primarily Italian success. Hitler's reply was immediate: the day after German radio had informed the (well-deserved) promotion of Rommel to *Feldmarschall*, thereby underlining the crucial impulse.

Inevitably in Rome arose the problem of similar extent against Cavallero and for Bastico. In an interview at the palazzo Venezia, Ciano expressed caustically about it, but he realized that Mussolini “is very saddened by the fact that the battle is given its name by Rommel and that looks more like a German victory than Italian. Even the appointment of Rommel to Marshal (...) is for the Duce many cause bitterness”<sup>(25)</sup>. After some hesitation, arrived in Libya, Mussolini decided suddenly to Cavallero<sup>(26)</sup>.

The promotion did not please. “Effect of all negative - noted Ciano - especially in military circles the ruling collected unanimous dispute”. It was not jealousy, as someone suggested. In fact, the criticism to nature of the character has long existed and was harsh.<sup>(27)</sup> Bastico will be promoted on 10 August, once decided the new order in North Africa.

## JULY 2

At first light of July 2 the 90<sup>th</sup> Light sailed to attack and almost immediately had to renounce to the absolute inability to overcome the very strong barrier of fire of the enemy. Having taken note of this inability to break through, Rommel issued to Nehring new orders: the DAK was to point towards the East, straddling the Ruweisat, and after seven kilometers turn in the direction of the coast, passing east of Alam el Onsol, in order to overcome the opposition of the two South African brigades. Then he would place the concentric action against the stronghold of El Alamein: the XXI Corps from the West and Southwest, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light from the South and the DAK from the East.

It was a significant change to the original plan to envelop 13<sup>th</sup> Corp. Rommel had to be convinced that evidently the crux of defense was in the area of Ruweisat; However, despite wanting to

search for the solution of the battle toward the Northeast, it was necessary to guard against any counter coming from the South.

Orders received by Gioda and De Stefanis tended to transfer the X Corps from the area of El Wishka to the positions of El Mreir and XX Corp from Saniet el Miteiriya area to localities of Alam Nayil and Deep Well (this is the name shown on the British charts). But everything was according to the DAK.

At the same time Auchinleck convincing himself that the enemy wanted to gather forces for a massive effort to break through against El Alamein and it was necessary to prevent it. The best, indeed the only to do, was a counterattack towards Sidi Abd el Rahman, in order to turn the entire *Panzerarmee*. This place became a luxury keeping immobilized units in sterile static defenses, so that the 5th Indian Division recovered the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade from Naqb Abu Dweis and the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division will proceed to abandon Bab el Qattara in due time. For the moment, though, the latter stronghold was to serve as a hinge for maneuver for the New Zealanders.

The fighting began shortly after 15:00, now that the DAK moved westward, along Ruweisat (sketch No. 55). At the same time, for a strange case, took away the British initiative. Neither maneuvers had time to decide: the head-on collision cancelled the plans. But he cancelled, all in all, in favor of the British.

Based on orders of Auchinleck, almost the entire southern positions of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had changed attitude. The 9<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade was behind Qaret el Himeimat up to and control of the area south of Bab el Qattara was employed by the 4<sup>th</sup> South African armored car Regiment. The 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade, with a wide circle had placed to the left of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division. The 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division had sent North a strong column under the command of Gen. Weir, who after orders and "counter-orders" was placed on the East side of Alam Nayil, in order to be able to beat Ruweisat with his artillery and covering the bulk of the Division, ready at Deir el Munassib. At Bab el Qattara remained the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade.

In this way the DAK met not only the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division and the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade, but also New Zealand battery fire from the South. The 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* was the most exposed to opponent fire conceding not small damage, while the 21<sup>st</sup> was unable to overcome the barrier of the South African artillery and *Robcol*, a column of the 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division settled on the western end of Ruweisat, and received the position of the *Grant*.

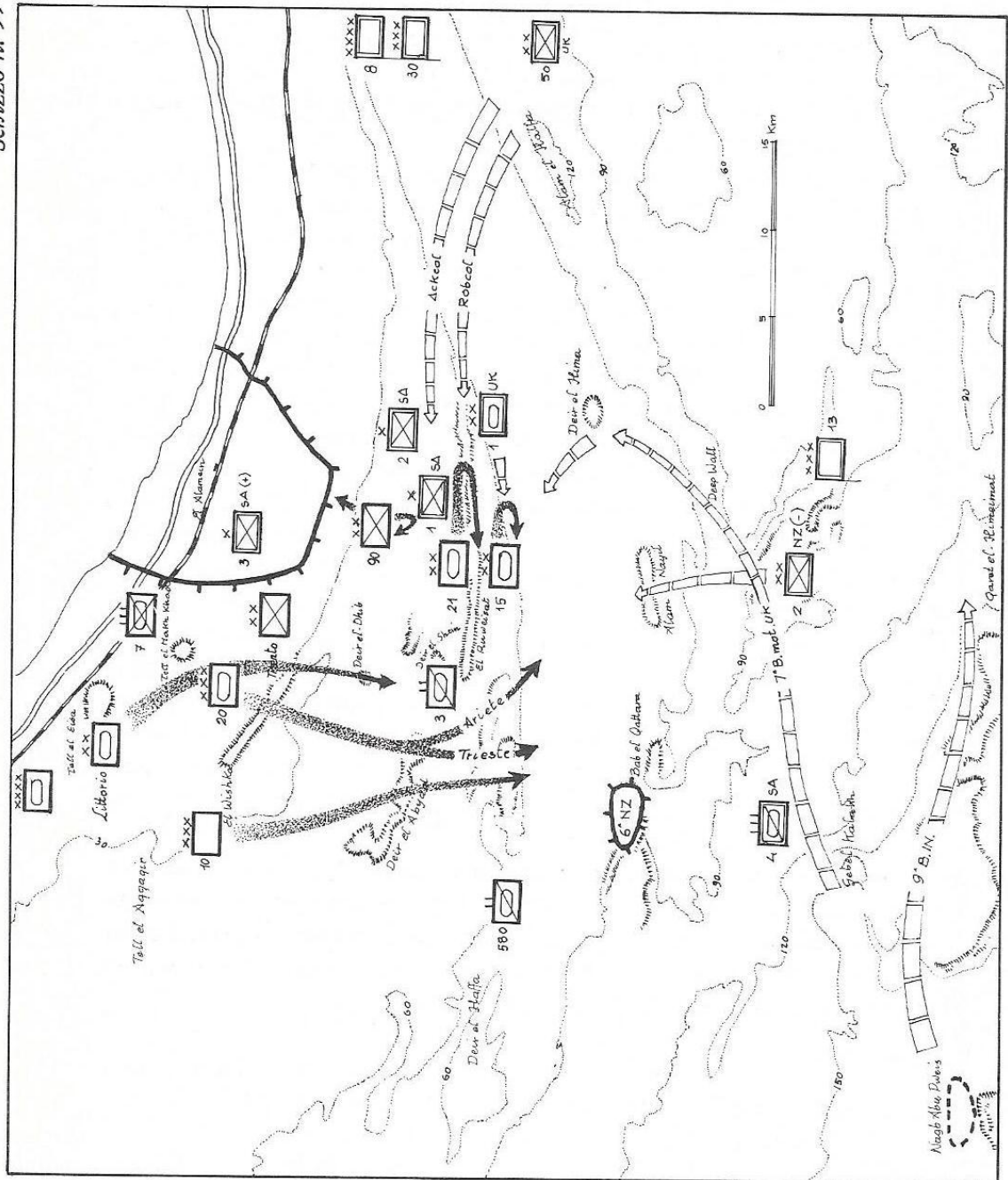
True it is that 1<sup>st</sup> South African Brigade was itself in a bad match



The events of July 2

GLI AVVENIMENTI DEL 2 LUGLIO

Schizzo n. 55



that Gen. Pienaar, who had openly criticized the decision to resist West of the Nile, asked him the Command of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp for some tanks in reinforcement, solution that Norrie however clearly saying that the days of using "*piecemeal*" had passed. Then Pienaar proposed to withdraw the Brigade over Alam el Onsol, replacing it with another formation. Opposite the new denial of Norrie, telephoned to the command of the army and received from Dorman Smith a further rejection. Pienaar insisted with Auchinleck, who came to grant the replacement with *Ackol*, a column of the 50<sup>th</sup> Division. Except Pienaar hastened to order the withdrawal of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade before *Ackol* arrived and the position was abandoned.

Confusion, sudden serious difficulties, the increasingly clear feeling of having to deal with an opponent too strong they forced the Germans to break off at dusk and gather Southeast of Deir el Shein. The 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer had 20 tanks remaining, the 15<sup>th</sup> with just 6.

The failure of DAK led to a general disruption. To the North, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, which clearly was not able to fight their way alone, had reiterated the attempt without conviction and without result. As regards the Italian divisions, the picture did not appear much more comforting. The XXI Corps were semi-shocked by the Royal *Air Force* raids and put online the XXXII Battalion of sappers, to close the gap that exists between the 7th Bersaglieri and the *Trento*, had been unable to do.

The XX Corps, then, it was too late. Its broad movement had carried it just south of Ruweisat, where the vanguard of the *Ariete*, the XXII Bersaglieri Battalion, was soon found under the fire of the 7th Brigade Motorized and the Weir column. The arrival of the bulk of the Division and the presence of a unit of 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* induced the British to fall back into the darkness. New Zealanders instead remained at Alam Nayil, without noticing the *Ariete*. The *Trieste*, on the other hand, arrived at El Mreir and already shocked by the bombing of the previous night, had been spotted and taken under fire from the batteries New Zealand's stronghold of Bab el Qattara. Given the late hour, Gen. Azzi chose to stop.

Finally, the X Corps had moved themselves onto the heights of El Mreir with II/27<sup>th</sup> of *Pavia*, II/20<sup>th</sup> of *Brescia* and the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri.

This is the situation at the fall of night.

## JULY 3

Rommel felt the game escape from his hands. On the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> addressed an appeal to the Comando Superiore so that he would get as many battalions as possible from X and XXI Corps. Too bad it was the inconsistency of the infantry divisions, so that they not only encountered serious difficulties of action, but also they were physically unable to take responsibility for adequate stretches in front. It followed the inability to form a true center of gravity of the attack. And, above all, the complete surrender of the design to encircle the British 13th Corp. There was only to continue in the effort: the DAK eastward to the coast and XX Corp to Deep Well to isolate at least the New Zealanders.

At 9.15 a Stuka bombardment prepared the way for the *Afrikakorps* and shortly afterwards the *Panzerdivisionen* left the base. But meanwhile, further South, were undergoing dramatic events (sketch No. 56).

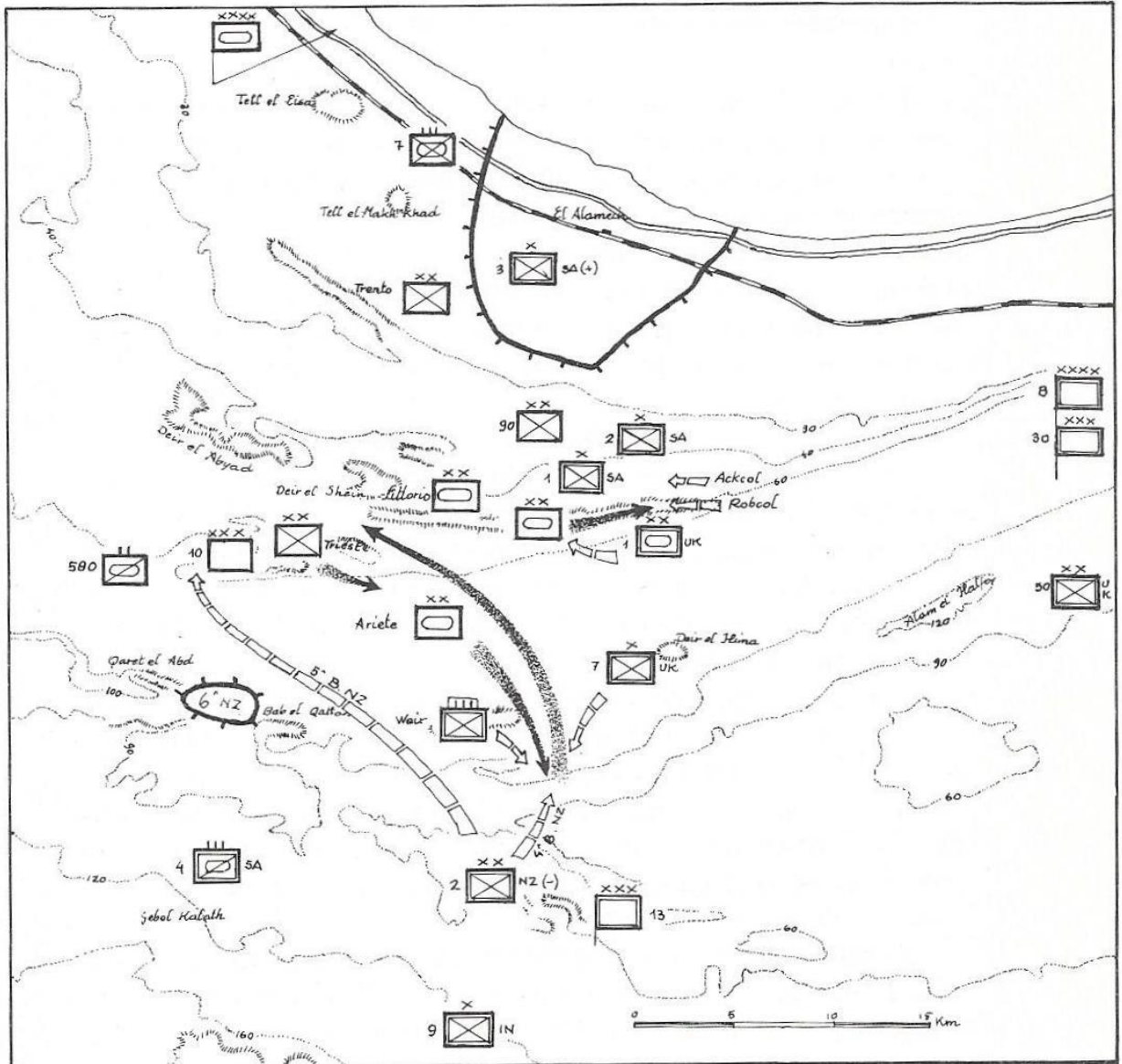
De Stefanis had ordered that at dawn the two divisions of the XX Corps were placed to defend the positions allocated respectively i.e. the *Trieste* at Alam Nayil (believed to be clear of enemy) and the *Ariete* at Deep Well, and seek to find the perimeter of the stronghold of Bab el Qattara and the consistency of its garrison.

Shortly after midnight the *Ariete* is set in motion. The 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri had been reduced to a few hundred men; the V Battalion was commanded by a Lieutenant, the XII by a Captain. The 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank featured eight efficient M.13. The 132<sup>nd</sup> had 40 artillery pieces, including 88 guns and 75 mm. semoventi. The movement to cover the six-seven kilometers South-East was very slow because of darkness and sand, however towards 04:00 the goal was achieved and the units prepared to settle at the strongpoint.

When Dawn flares allowed him to see something, it appeared the mistake in choosing the location: Deep Well was a rather deep depression, a large basin. Worse yet, beyond the borders of Western, Southern and Eastern loomed movements of men and vehicles. The uncertainty over the identity they did not last long, because a series of concentrations of artillery pieces, vehicles and cleared without any doubt that the *Ariete* was in a sea of trouble. At 05:15 on Gen. Arena sent a message very clam but equally eloquent to Corps Command:

GLI AVVENIMENTI DEL 3 LUGLIO

Schizzo n. 56



"We have achieved the prescribed area. We had to assume front W, S, E, because several elements are visible in these three directions. Fire comes from artillery from the E, the W, the N. The 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> divisions are at 8 km North-East from us. I don't see the *Trieste*. Given the strength available in riflemen and the need to cope with possible attacks from every direction, the situation of the Division remains delicate. Therefore please consider the opportunity to advance and represent the situation of the *Ariete* to the German Supreme Command. Arrived at this time near me two German armored cars of the Germany 15th and 21st in"<sup>(28)</sup>.

Arena hopes about an intervention from above were misplaced because the message came under the Command of XX Corps at 08:00, almost three hours later; because to the DAK was however already intended for a final attempt to resolve the battle toward the East; because the *Trieste* had not received timely the order to resume the advance on Alam Nayil<sup>(29)</sup> and was still at El Mreir.

The isolation and the precarious tactical situation of the *Ariete* was rapidly perceived by the enemy. The first to open fire was the Weir column from Alam Nayil, who easily won the duel of artillery batteries located in serious difficulty for the observation of the shot. The losses of personal, in the open, became sensitive. Then appeared the means of the British 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade from the North-East. At 08:00 Arena told De Stefanis: "*I confirm we only under intense, continuous artillery fire coming from the West, North and East (...)*"<sup>(30)</sup>. Then appeared from the South the 4th New Zealand Brigade sent from Deir el Munassib, divided into two columns (the 19<sup>th</sup> battalion with the 4<sup>th</sup> field artillery battalion with 20<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> field artillery) and with the support of armored vehicles. The M.13 opposed the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade in a blatantly unequal action. The V Bersaglieri battalion tried to cope with the North-East. New Zealanders touched the XII battalion, left with *one* machine gun and without ordinary shells for 47/32 pieces. Around 10:00 the fight had ended. The *Ariete* lost 531 men, 36 pieces of various caliber and 55 vehicles.<sup>(31)</sup>

While the remains of the division fell back more towards to El Mreir, De Stefanis ordered that the *Ariete* to reorganize what remained behind the *Pavia* and the *Trieste*<sup>(32)</sup> - whose vehicles had intermingled with those of *Pavia* - he placed an extension of the X Corps, Southeast, instead than continue on to Alam Nayil.

During the morning the action of DAK had not made progress because the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* was forced to remain in place to ensure the deployment of the *Trieste*. Although hit by the disaster of the *Ariete*, at 12:50 Rommel ordered Nehring: "*I call for a vigorous attack*

of the entire DAK", entrusting to recon battalions the protection of the southern flank. The *Littorio* and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light had to be ready to intervene.

The 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* not only did not achieve any concrete results in northern Ruweisat, but neither was able to inflict losses to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> South African Brigade. The 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* was soon halted by 56 tanks of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. and the bulk of the British 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd.; but at around 16:00, driven by new solicitations of Rommel, he is repulsed forward and occupied Alam Baoshaza. Was the maximum penetration and extreme *effort*. The English 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. had lost 39 tanks.

Meanwhile the 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade - with 24 pieces of 25 pounds of the 6<sup>th</sup> field artillery, 16 pieces A/T. of 6 pounds and 16 *Bofors* A/A.- headed to El Mreir to engrave on the side of the Italian - German deployment. At 16:00 the vanguard arrived in sight of the objective. The X Corps had organized themselves quickly in defense: the two battalions of the *Brescia* occupied the northern edge of the depression; the two of the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri were moved slightly to the Southeast. After a brief artillery preparation, the attack developed both sides of depression trying to get through, but soon had to desist from the enterprise because of the intense fire of arrest of the *Brescia*.

At 20:10 Rommel resigned himself to stop troops on the positions reached. The situation had become worrisome. German armored troops, spearhead of the army, appeared exhausted; the *Ariete*, the best Italian Division, for the time being was unusable; Italian infantry divisions, which always complained about the smallness of their structure, now had reached the extreme limit of operational sufficiency. Von Mellenthin recalled bitterly: "*Everyone realized that the offensive started on May 26, and that had reported so spectacular victories, was unfortunately at the end*"<sup>(33)</sup>.

From what emerges in memories of Rommel, the element at that crucial failure would be the *Ariete*, which had always fought well "*even under the protection of artillery and German tanks*", as Rommel is quick to point out. The unfortunate episode of Deep Well caused an unexpected disappointment and loss not easily repairable, endangered the southern flank of the DAK and removing force to his attack, finally placed in evidence that the Italians could not be counted much to overcome the crisis. In this order of ideas, the Commander of the army telegraphed to Kesselring:

"With the current fighting force and given the situation of supplies, an attack on a large scale is not currently possible. Barely able to feed

the army at night, because the streets there are inhibited from enemy air activity (...)."

Then complained about the lack of help I received from allies, citing the case of the *Ariete*, of which 360 men "*were captured without having given the enemy a resistance worthy of the name*"<sup>(34)</sup>.

At 22:00 Col. Mancinelli told Comando Superiore that Rommel reserved that night, after a thorough examination of the State of the troops and supplies, to decide whether to insist in the offensive or temporarily assume a defensive attitude, notwithstanding his belief that we can solve the incumbent difficulties favorably on the axis troops.

That day, of course with consent of Mussolini and Cavallero, the Comando Superiore prescribed the adoption of the designation (AIT) Italian-German Army, in place of the previous *Armored Army Africa* or *Panzerarmee Afrika*. The measure, however, was not disclosed by means of a formal official communication<sup>(35)</sup>.

In the field, especially in the Italian XX Corps, "*the morale has been shaken by the actions of the day and especially the inevitable withdrawal*"<sup>(36)</sup>. The matter, therefore, it cannot avoid a word of comment. That failure has occurred at the discouragement can not surprise, taking account of the circumstances and of the land on which the units of the *Ariete* found themselves suddenly to fight. Let us not forget that two days before "*the panic breaks out the ranks of the Division (15:30 hours)* -reported the war diary of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light - *and stopped just in time by the energetic intervention of the Commander of the Division and head of the G.S.*", a panic caused by the growing British and South African artillery fire and had the essence of a stampede of services elements and of German units<sup>(37)</sup>.

As to the origin of the event, it seems that it is to be ascribed to the stop of the *Ariete* in a tactically unfortunate area and to the delay of the *Trieste*, causes about which you do not have to complete a specific charge, although it is clear any deficiency in action and in links. Mancinelli, who the next day he went to the command of XX Corps, telegraphed to the Comando Superiore: "(..) *The Division was caught in unfavorable situation following incorrect understanding, misunderstood was entitled believe be covered from the South and East*"<sup>(38)</sup>.

On the British side the 3 July incidents were interpreted in a positive sense. Auchinleck's orders for the following day remained essentially unchanged: 30 Corp must cope with

the Italian-German impact, while 13 was to try to break the flank and rear of the enemy, by cutting off the line of operations.

In London, Churchill had won his battle with a parliamentary an absolute triumph: the motion of Wardlaw-Milne had been rejected by the House of Commons by 475 votes to 25. Concluding the debate, the Prime Minister spoke at length of the events in the Middle East and relations between the Government and military leaders. Among other things he said:

“I accept willingly, in truth they are obliged to accept, what the noble Lord [the Earl of Winterton] has defined the 'constitutional responsibility' for everything that happened. I think I have paid is not interfering in technical use ever of hosts in contact with the enemy. Before the battle had started, however, I urged the General Auchinleck to take command personally because I was certain that during the next or the next two months would not have happened in the vast operating theater in the Middle East anything comparable in importance to those fighting in the Western Desert and thought that he was the man for you. He gave various reasons for not doing so and so General Ritchie fought the battle. As I said in the House of Commons on Tuesday, Gen. Auchinleck replaced General Ritchie on June 25 and took personal command. We immediately approved that decision, but I must frankly confess that this was not an issue on which we could make a definitive judgment as regards to the general now replaced. I desire that the commanders of land and sea and sky have the impression that between them and any public criticism of the government as a bulwark is therefore unshakable. They must have the opportunity to make mistakes and even more of a chance: humans can make mistakes and learn from their mistakes; men can be unlucky and bad luck can change. But in any case you'll never risk to deal with General, without the impression of having a strong Government. They will no face risks unless they are convinced that they don't have to look after what happens behind them and worry about what's happening at home, unless they have the impression they could focus their attention on the opponent (...)<sup>(39)</sup>.

Then, that same morning, soon after the parliamentary crisis, hastened to write to Auchinleck:

“On 1 July we communicated our confidential information that the enemy after a feint on your southern flank, would attack the center of your front, roughly at the 18<sup>th</sup> Brigade, and then would turn North to isolate the cornerstone of El Alamein. This is exactly what he seems to have tried to do.

Been getting these reports in a timely manner of inestimable value and that never are shown false? Each telegram like that should arrive in your hands without a moment's delay (...)<sup>(40)</sup>.

From Cairo, Corbett replied. First of all made sure that “*every special source message goes directly to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army*” and assured that



some few arrived in time to profit the ongoing operation, others not at all. The 8<sup>th</sup> Armored Division was underway of arrival: two squadrons of *Valentine* had already reached the 1st Tank Brigade; for mid-July a full armored brigade would be ready. The 9th Australian Division, minus one Brigade (coming tomorrow) was in Alexandria and a combat group, with 24 pieces of 25 pounders, had already left for El Alamein.

Let's say also that Churchill's honeyed tone masking a different mood. Wanted to fly immediately to Cairo and Brooke managed barely persuade him to postpone the trip, at least until things had stabilized. On the other hand, Churchill shall rage against the Commander in Chief of the Middle East in cabinet meetings:

“I made an unlikely fatigue-Brooke wrote in his diary-to defend Auchinleck and underlining the difficulties of his current position. Not to mention the fact that any hasty replacement at this time we would quickly lose Egypt. The Prime Minister was in one of his moments of bad mood and, back on the old argument, I asked where are the 750,000 men of the Middle East, what they do and why not fight. Shortly after ... with an amazing stretch of the sympathy that features, he came up to me and said: “*Brookie, I'm sorry to have been so unfair with Auchinleck and the men of the Middle Eastern*”<sup>(41)</sup>.

#### JULY 4

Examined the situation, Rommel decided to go for the time being to the defensive and finalize the completion of the army, especially in terms of logistics. Thought sufficient to fifteen days, indispensable to bring 12-15,000 German complements; at the same time also the Italian bodies could be put back in order. On the tactical plan had no worries. The line held by units was very narrow and favorable because not circumvented at short-range. Rather, taking an appropriate density of forces to fend off likely response, the projection forward of all drives initially became inevitable. The defensive attitude, however, did not exclude initiatives such as the conquest of Naqb Abu Dweis to hold on the right of the deployment and employment of Siwa to take away from the enemy the chance of falling on his outreached rear. Finally he expected British attack in the Central sector, and for this he had inserted the *Littorio* at Ruweisat between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*. The *Ariete*

had been withdrawn from the front and back to Deir el Dhib to settle out: when in possession of 5 tanks and 2 pieces of 75/27, but waited to return artillery group already ceded to *Littorio* and assigning 30 new incoming tanks to XX Corps.

Cavallero followed the unfolding of the fighting from afar. Informed of the intentions of Rommel, delivered to Bastico the following directives:

“Duce agrees with and confirms the need temporary stop to tidy up units, to inject reinforcements, men and equipment. A turnout this provision is made with maximum effort, while the Comando Supremo also provides from Italy. Stop time is left to the judgment of the Italian-German command armored army, which will inform Supercomando”<sup>(42)</sup>.

To be frank, the tone, if not the substance, of such directives is pretty irritating, transparent being the desire to show that the reins of the campaign were held directly by Rome. Wanting to be sophisticated, the first part of the message is taken for granted, knowing full well that it is precisely the lack of forces *required* a breakthrough. Incitement to the Comando Superiore (cut off from every operational decision) to make every effort to provide for replenishments, can also be considered superfluous by knowing well the difficulties in the field of transport. The assurance that the Comando Supremo would do the same was somewhat vague, but, in fact, the day before Cavallero had announced the dispatch by air of complements and three infantry battalions, seven have long been prepared in Italy. In addition, on 1 July, in an interview with Bastico, Kesselring, Fougier and Marquis were formalizing measures to increase the safety of maritime transport. Finally the duration of stopover seems better would have been a bite with Rommel, seeing that the issue depended on what would have been received from Italy and Germany.

Rommel was to urge a meeting with Cavallero and Kesselring, and he did just that morning. And did not hide much the perplexity over the fact that Cavallero has instructed Bastico and Leut. Col. Montezemolo visiting in his stead at the meeting, set for the following day 5 July. The meeting did not take place, but I do not know the reason.

From the above it is clear that Rommel had resumed, or rather did not at all lost his natural optimism. While expecting some opposing move, did not consider the critical moment, nor considered that the strengthening of the army could be in any way threatened. As a result, a steady reshuffling in the

dispositions, replacing with the X Corps the DAK and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light in salient of Ruweisat and bringing the German divisions between the El Mreir and Qaret el Himeimat track.

On the other hand Auchinleck was more and more and getting better acquainted with the intentions of his opponent. The decryption of *Enigma* messages on the network of the *Luftwaffe* had achieved the beautiful figure of a hundred per day. Their obvious and exceptional importance were supplemented by numerous operational details on the location of headquarters and the AIT, troops on the ground and supplies on the situation and plans of the *Fliegerführer*. "What's more, some Enigma decodes revealed that the tension between Kesselring and Rommel was now high"<sup>(43)</sup>. So, in the early hours of the 4<sup>th</sup> Auchinleck came to know that that day Rommel would not attacked.

At Ruweisat the first unit to move was the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and the 15<sup>th</sup> was spreading northwards to mask the retrograde motion, but the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division was aware of such (14:15 hours) and reported to the army immediately<sup>(44)</sup>. Truth be told, the interim Commander of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, Col. Crasemann, had protested-unnecessarily-not being able to keep the area without reinforcement, instead was left with only 15 efficient tanks and two days of fire, and the same Nehring looked with concern at the intermittent activity of British armored vehicles, so as to write at 10:30 in the DAK war diary that the situation in the area of 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* was very serious. At 15:00 the Division was forced to retreat a few kilometers under the pressure of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade against the 115<sup>th</sup> Fusilier Regiment, but was quickly circumscribed, partly thanks to the intervention of an 88. The episode gave rise to a false alarm at the AIT Command. By intercepting British reports that seemed, at first, that 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, overtaken from 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade during the retreat, had lost 600 men, surrendered en masse. After a few hours was found to be groundless news resulting probably from messy retrograde movement of 115<sup>th</sup> Fusilier.

Surprisingly for the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*'s withdrawal from Ruweisat before the replacement by X Corps, as expected, but the operation was suspended as a result of an urgent communication of Rommel to Gioda: "*Prepare to attack the enemy from the South or Southwest. In time turned down*"<sup>(45)</sup>. An hour later he followed orders to change only starting at 9 a.m. the next day. The *Pavia* was to occupy the field of 90<sup>th</sup> Light, the *Brescia* to stay on the rear of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* connecting right with the *Trieste*.

The feared attack occurred around 21:00, after a brief artillery preparation, by the 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade. The sector invested to El Mreir, the track for Naqb Abu Dweis, was that of II/27<sup>th</sup> Infantry of the *Brescia*. The wide intervals between the positions and the darkness of the night allowed initial success on some fire centers, but counterattacks and arresting fire the Italians restored the situation in a couple of hours.

All in all, 4 day saw no noticeable changes. However you can make two considerations. The first concerns the extreme fatigue and the smallness of Italian and German divisions, which, as reported to OKW, Rommel had little more than a thousand men each. The semi destruction of the *Ariete*, the panic of the moment 90<sup>th</sup> Light, the episode of 115<sup>th</sup> Fusilier at Ruweisat, were very obvious symptoms of achieved human forces. Rommel stresses essentially insufficient ammunition supply, but he doesn't seem the worst aspect of the moment, even if such severe deficiency-undoubtedly-resulted in a couple of days. The second survey relates to the action of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp, to which orders apparently passed to the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division. Knowing that Rommel's orders for that day did not involve any offensive action, knowing the place of DAK, having clearly perceived the retreat of 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer having also experienced the collapse of the thin German line on Ruweisat and having no less than hundred tanks in the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division, it is not clear how Norrie has not been taken advantage of the fleeting moment. Given the unstable equilibrium of the AIT, it is to consider that a local breakthrough might have had consequences very large, perhaps decisive extent.

To frame the scope of British aircraft operations, add that from dusk on 2 July to dusk of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of the *Royal Air Force* took place nine hundred missions, with a ratio of about 4 to 1 in relation to axis aviation. "*Were dropped bombs on troops and on means of transport [Italian-Germans] at an average of ten tons per hour*" adds the official report of the British<sup>(46)</sup>.

## **2. The BATTLE of TELL EL EISA (10-12 July)**

On the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> the AIT commander briefed the Corps commanders to take stock. He admitted that, despite the efforts made in recent days of fierce fighting, it was not

been possible to achieve a successful strategic level because the enemy organization had revealed itself much more substantial than expected. The AIT, eliminated the cornerstone of Deir el Shein, had managed to insert a wedge between the *box* of El Alamein and the Bab el Qattara, but had not been able to complete the turning of the two strongpoints. This depended on the swiftness of the exploitation of the success, swiftness that had constrained the participation of bodies of infantry in weak columns that had been possible auto-transport. The army was now on the defensive to allow both retrieving everything that was left behind, and the influx of complements and reinforcements. As soon as writing off losses and rearranged, he resumed the offensive. In the present circumstances, however, assumed great importance on knowing how to keep the positions reached against possible British counterattacks and predictable and, in particular, it was necessary to retain the salient, which was the essential precondition for the continuation of the effort.

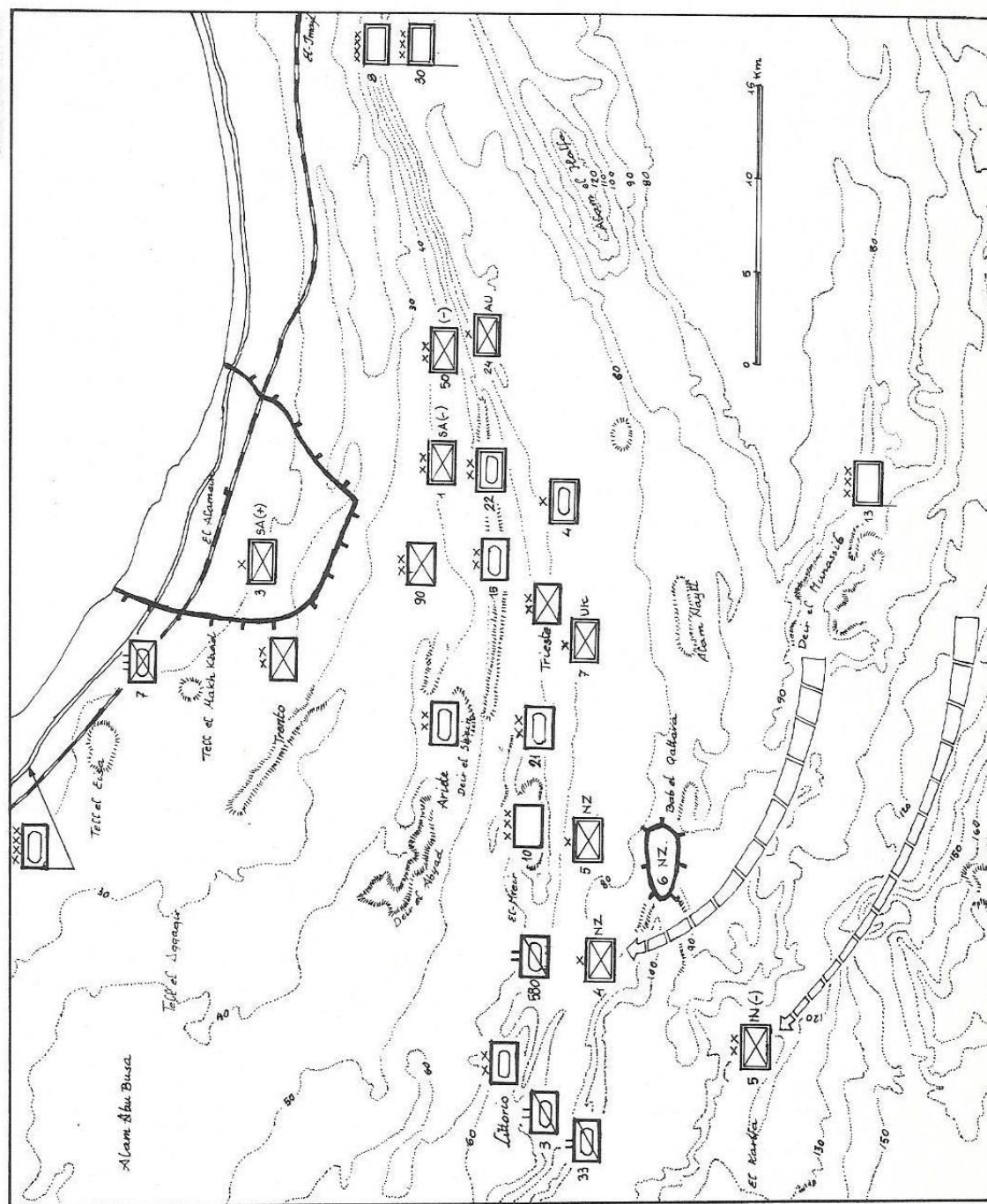
Among the measures to be taken for the transition to defensive the maximum use of minefields (also using English landmines) true and false, the earthworks, the deployment of fake 88 pieces, ultimately, work of field fortification and the technique of deception and concealment.

However Rommel poorly suited to cede the initiative to the enemy or, more simply, to give him time. *“He-reported Mancinelli-continues to judge the current situation with absolute confidence and claimed to be able to resume movement”*<sup>(47)</sup>. But getting a mass shock that would move against the 2nd New Zealand Division to remove any concern on the right wing (thoughts more rooted in Rommel at that time) was not easy. Moving X Corps between El Alamein and Ruweisat found obstacles. The divisions were truly in distress and the insistence with which demanded the intervention of higher hierarchy levels was dictated by real serious difficulties. The historical diary of the Comando Superiore noted under the date of 5 July: *“increasingly pressing requests from units (accompanied by the expressions “as soon as possible”, “with the greatest urgency”, “immediately”; the commander has been answered: “We understand fully your needs but you have to make a great effort”*. So the AIT was forced to see all its divisions in the line, a long, graceful sand colored line (sketch No. 57).

Even Mussolini felt strong unease existing. Had wandered around Cyrenaica a bit: he had been in Tobruk, visited units arriving, after hearing the news from the front. The 5<sup>th</sup> put in writing some personal observations. Regardless of the natural directive to accelerate the

### The situation on the evening of 5 July

## Schizzo n. 57



maximum arrivals from Italy and solicitation to pursue what existed of "*Mobile or movable*" Tripolitania "*doing what in only an hour such as this must be able to do the impossible*," he ordered the transfer to the front of most of the anti-aircraft batteries in the rear, provided that "*the nervousness that you begin to report between commands and troops of our line, facing repeated and serious enemy air attacks, deserves more consideration*" <sup>(48)</sup>.

For a few days both sides reorganized. British attempt was exhausted without reaching concrete results, such as the action on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>, the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division and the 9<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade began from Bab el Qattara to Sidi Abd el Rahman peaking at the Minqar Wahla area, who left the 7<sup>th</sup> facing a attack by the *Kampfstaffel* and units of the *Littorio*, and the incursion of a column of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade until to Varuna.

Auchinleck then came to the conclusion that very little had the chance of a cut from the Italian-German salient, thereby isolating the entire army of Rommel. Furthermore it was substantial discontent of inactivity of Gen. Norrie, so resolve to replace him in the command 30 Corp with Gen. Ramsden, until 6 July, Commander of the British 50<sup>th</sup> Division.

Several local actions had confirmed in front the western side of the El Alamein *box* lay the faint of the Italian XXI Corps. As a result, Auchinleck decided to launch a diversionary attack on Ruweisat with the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division; focus around the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp in the area of Alam Nayil to use it at a later time advisedly and meanwhile protect the left of the British line, hoping at the same time that Rommel would accept an invitation to go on the main desert track to Cairo (the track of barrels), apparently discovered; then attack north.

In the night on 8 July the 24<sup>th</sup> Australian Brigade (Gen. Godfrey) moves against the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer on Ruweisat, getting some initial success provided that came to destroy some German guns and tractors. Moreover, the intervention of the divisional reserve and the artillery of the *Pavia* restored calm to the area <sup>(49)</sup>.

Further south the New Zealanders withdrew into that night. Both the performance the 7<sup>th</sup> the activities established 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division (Gen. J. W. Renton), formed by the 7<sup>th</sup> Motorized Brigade and 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade <sup>(50)</sup>, for both the Australian action, retrograde motion was not initially warned.

Only at noon of the 8<sup>th</sup> the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer's reported to DAK that the New Zealand Brigade had abandoned positions south of El Mreir

and at 21:50 the strongpoint of Bab el Qattara seemed devoid of defenders. Rommel was aware of these novelties on the morning of the 9<sup>th</sup> when phoned Nehring for another reason, and it's easy to imagine with spite. Immediately dispose of the occupation with a tactical group of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and three hours later it fell furious under the control of the *Afrikakorps*.

Not it was now simply to seize the opportunity to arrange suitably the right of the AIT, but to exploit even the favorable moment: “*in the meantime-wrote Rommel- I had the precise idea of the strength of the El Alamein line and I had discovered to the South his weak spot*”<sup>(51)</sup>. In this order of ideas was convinced that the opponent withdrawing his left as a result of the threat created the push -in-Act of exploring of the German Marcks group of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light and *Littorio* southward and beyond the track for Naqb Abu Dweis did not exist other defensive structures. He concluded therefore that the entire right wing of the AIT rotate eastward hinging on the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*.

In the early afternoon of the 9<sup>th</sup> Rommel reached von Bismarck in Bab el Qattara. Since it was a stronghold prepared in a position tactically very responsive with concrete emplacements, protected by minefields and most importantly still well- equipped ammunition and reinforcement materials, he was well aware of the meaning of retreat New Zealand: “*the eviction of this position there seemed incomprehensible*”<sup>(52)</sup>. However it was provided that the euphoric OKW, considering the convenience of strategically exploit success on African theatre, had asked him what felt the need reinforcements and he had wondered, as a first measure, the immediate dispatch of two motorized divisions<sup>(53)</sup>.

At 20:00 the Mackenzie had wing alignment Bab el Qattara -el Taqa, playing for time rejecting mechanized and motorized actions.

“It is believed possible —telegraphed Mancinelli to the Comando Superiore -the enemy is in general withdraw, leaving perhaps only armored forces. There are still items for orders for tomorrow.

Trend East complete movement started today without inducing enemy hasty decisions so we still have available few days available complete organization. If however the enemy took the withdraw initiative, AIT would give chase.

The situation of German units: sufficient fuel up to Cairo, ammunition sufficient to predict fighting until this objective”<sup>(54)</sup>.

Rommel was still rosy.



The nightfall of the 10<sup>th</sup> the situation of the Italian units was as follows (sketch No. 58). The XXI Corps kept the El Alamein sector with the *Sabratha* (85<sup>th</sup> Inf. with one Bn., 86<sup>th</sup> Inf. with two battalions and 3<sup>rd</sup> Quick Artillery), the *Trento* (61<sup>st</sup> and 62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. with three battalions and 46<sup>th</sup> Artillery) and 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri (with two Bns.). The X Corps was holding the Ruweisat sector with the *Pavia* (27<sup>th</sup> Inf. with one Bn., 28<sup>th</sup> Inf. with two battalions, 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri with two battalions and 26<sup>th</sup> Artillery) and *Brescia* (19<sup>th</sup> Inf. with one Bn. and 1<sup>st</sup> Quick Artillery). The XX Corps were to the rear of the X with the *Trieste* (65<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> Inf. with two Bns., 16 medium tanks and 4 armored cars, inefficient and 21<sup>st</sup> Artillery) at Deir el Shein, the *Ariete* (a Bersaglieri co., 18 inefficient medium tanks and 4 armored cars, two batteries) at Deir el Dhib and, now, even the *Littorio*, whose command was taken on July 8 by Gen. Becuzzi (12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri with two Bns., 11 medium tanks and 9 light tanks) southwest of Bab el Qattara. The II/65<sup>th</sup> infantry *Trieste* was temporarily seconded to the Group Marcks at Jebel Kalakh. This line-up was still incomplete due to the additions of new units and substitutions in the line.

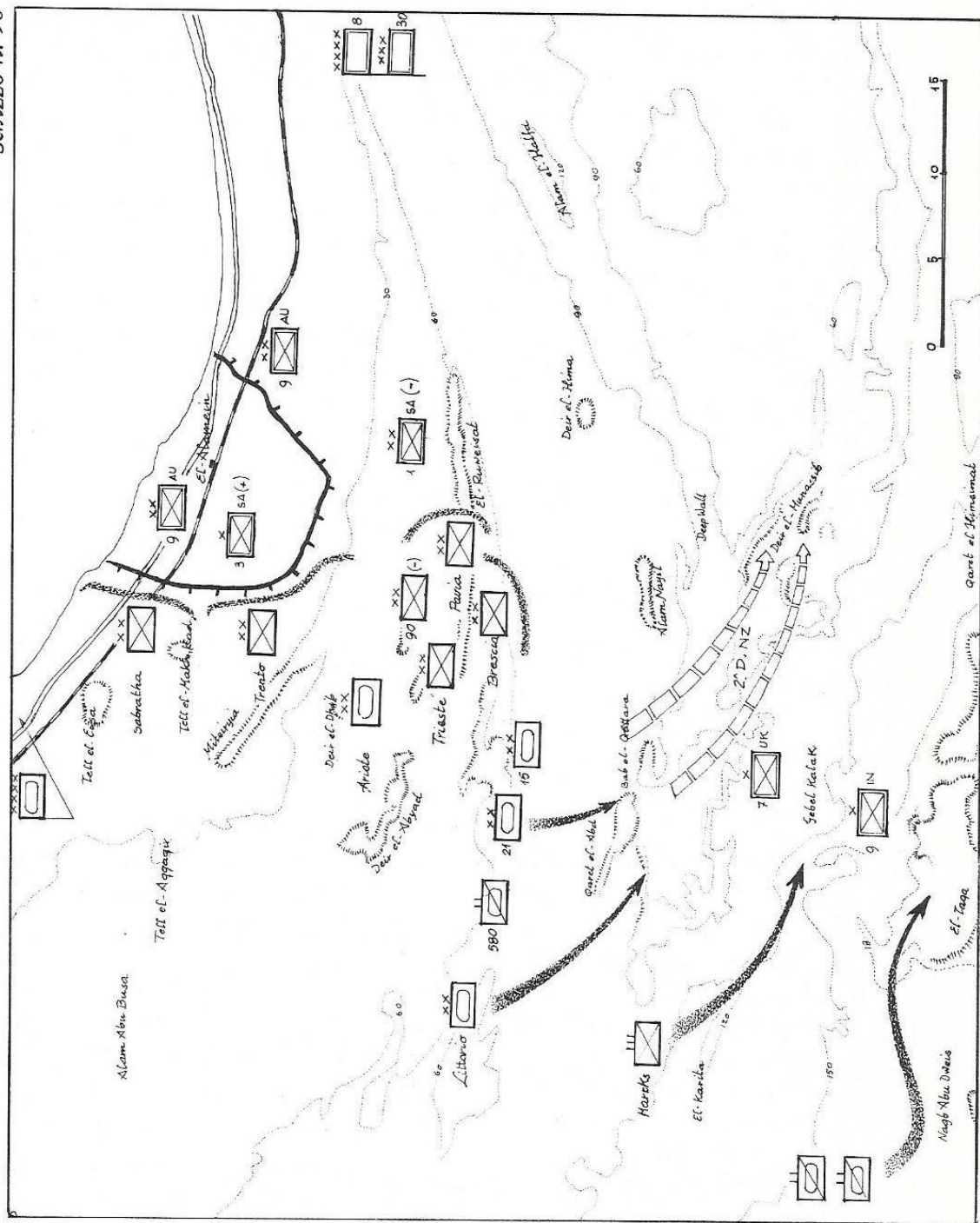
The battalions had a strength present varies from 250 to 450 men, with a significant numerical deficiency in officers and NCOs, and almost all were practically dismounted. The morale was generally good, except for XX Corps. The episode of Deep Well had left traces. From 4 July in the historical diary of Corps troop morale is always described as "quite depressed" and will begin to show signs of improvement only in the third week of the month. To add that on July 9 the diary reports: "*We note in the commander a certain nervousness, especially for inadequacies of men and equipment of the units*".

Meanwhile, on 8 July Auchinleck had come to know with certainty, through *Enigma* and interceptions, that the bulk of mobile troops of Rommel were gravitating to the south-central sector. Immediately ordered Ramsden to study the employment of two low reliefs of Tell el Eisa and Tell el Makh Khad-(four kilometres southeast of the former), which in a certain way they controlled the coastal road. He knew that the sector was held by weak Italian formations and which, according to aerial photographs, the defensive works were very hasty. The objective was to form the basis for an attack of columns towards Deir el Shein and commando raids towards the landing strip at El Daba.

The plan drafted by 30 Corp gave Tell el Eisa command to the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, reinforced by the 44<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* with 32 *Valentine*, and Tell el-Markh Khad to the South African Division (less the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade) reinforced by eight *Matilda*. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corp was to prevent

GLI AVVENIMENTI DEL 9 LUGLIO

Schizzo n. 58



Rommel removed troops from southern front in favor of the Italian XXI Corps and be able to exploit any good opportunity. To do this, he was awarded the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade, with the main task to openly exhibit to hit the AIT.

“On July 10, around 05:00 hours-Rommel, recalled that he had spent the night at Bab el Qattara depression-we were woken up by the dull rumble of artillery from the northern sector. I had suffered a bad premonition” <sup>(55)</sup>.

The premonition was well placed. At 03:30 the positions of XXI Corps was hit by a series of violent artillery concentrations, with the apparent character of the preparation. The shooting lasted continuously for about two hours, however countered counter-battery by two groups of the 8<sup>th</sup> Artillery of the Army.

At 06:00, extended a smoke screen, behind it the enemy infantry left the starting point.

The Australians had in the first row the 26<sup>th</sup> brigade with 2/24, 2/48 and part of the 2/23 battalions, followed by 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment; in the reserve the 20<sup>th</sup> Brigade <sup>(56)</sup>. Fire support was provided by three divisional artillery regiments and the 7<sup>th</sup> medium artillery. Each battalion of the 26th Brigade, with four companies was reinforced by riflemen, machine gunners, anti-tank units and engineers, as well as a squadron of tanks.

The South Africans had planned to use the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade (with a battalion of the 5<sup>th</sup>) under the command of Gen. Palmer. In particular, the battalions had clearly differentiated tasks: the *Natal Mounted Rifles* reinforced by eight *Matilda* had to push up to Bir el Maqtua and possibly little more than <sup>(57)</sup>; the 2<sup>nd</sup> *Botha* with ten armoured cars had to be ready to build on the success and the *Cape Town Highlanders* ensure the exit points from the strongpoint. Fire support was provided by the South African artillery from El Alamein.

The Australian attack developed decisively, breaking the line of the *Sabratha* astride the railroad and highway, isolating the XI Bersaglieri battalion and the II/85<sup>th</sup> Infantry (about to replace the Bersaglieri) and smashing the II/86<sup>th</sup> Infantry. The momentum was achieved and overwhelmed the deployment of I and IV/3<sup>rd</sup> Quick Artillery, then captured the 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and finally invested the XXXIII 149/40 group and the LII 152/37group of the 8<sup>th</sup> Artillery of the Army. At 08:00 the goal of Tell el Eisa was partially conquered.

The position of the XXI Corps had become suddenly serious. In the sector of *Sabratha* remained encircled a couple of companies of II/85<sup>th</sup>

Infantry, the XI/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and III/3<sup>rd</sup> Quick Artillery, the duration of that resistance was a question mark. Even more to the left, near the coast, the X/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, isolated, also. At the Center, at the turn of the track for Naqb Abu Dweis, the XXXII battalion of sappers. On the right, the *Trento*, not directly attacked but kept under pressure by South African artillery.

The XXI Corps had available the X/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri with the IV/46<sup>th</sup> Artillery to barrage the road. Similarly, the AIT Command, which was located a few kilometers Northwest of Tell el Eisa and had perceived almost immediately the reverse of the *Sabratha*, ran for cover before tapping into the headquarters element then starting immediately to block the penetration with a battalion of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light and complements the 382<sup>nd</sup> Fusiliers of the 164<sup>th</sup> Division, fortunately just then coming up. Thanks to the placing of these units and also aviation intervention, came in order for Navarini to contain the Australians at 7 kilometers from broken front and about 12:00 the line had reached a certain stillness.

Among the losses recorded by the Germans in this circumstance, one was particularly important: 621<sup>st</sup> electronic exploration company was destroyed or captured with all of its documents. Its commander, Captain Seebohm, severely wounded was taken prisoner. The value of wiretaps made by such special unit had been even higher, tactical purposes, the decryption of the Fellers report. The documents taken by the enemy knowing the activities carried out by the company and, consequently, modify and rearranged their whole procedure of communications.

Instead the South African attack had faded to nothing: some initial misunderstanding, excessive caution, a precise reaction of Italian fire meant that the action, which began at 05:30, that is now in daylight, proceeded slowly losing seven out of eight tanks and no plausible reason is interrupted shortly after.

Of course it was necessary to somehow fix the Australian salient issues. In the morning, Rommel had convened several commanders. Radio communication at 10:30 to De Stefanis was alarmed: "*The situation is critical. Commanders [of the Corps] and division commanders appear immediately at Oberfehlshaber (...)*" but now from the central area of the front were moving troops: to the Kiehl group, that had passed the dependencies of the II/65<sup>th</sup> infantry with a battery of III/21<sup>st</sup> artillery; a mobile column of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, a column of *Trieste*, formed by the commander of 66<sup>th</sup>

Infantry, the XI Tank battalion (about 20 tanks) and one battery of artillery IV/21<sup>st</sup>.

During the afternoon, no substantial changes occurred and both sides of artillery activity was lively and took place around the salient took place reinforcements, including the I/85<sup>th</sup> infantry of the *Sabratha*, from Bardia, soon followed by the command of the *Trieste* and by all the 21<sup>st</sup> artillery. Unfortunately, the attempt to restore the status quo ante went awry. The first was to be started at 19:30 by the *Sabratha* with the X/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, the I/85<sup>th</sup> Infantry and I/65<sup>th</sup> Infantry of the *Trieste* (not yet available), in order to regain the lost strongholds. Then, at 19:35, came a counter order: only the X/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri would take part in the counterattack to retake their old positions backed by the IV/46<sup>th</sup> Artillery. At 20:30, new adjustment: the action was canceled.

Meanwhile, the *Littorio*, always without artillery, was assaulted by units of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade and moved on Deep Well. Disengaged themselves with difficulty and the loss of several light tanks, to take provisions toward Bab el Qattara, organizing the best faces a stronghold, with the assistance of a 105 battery, one of 150 and one of 25 pounder of war booty transferred temporarily from the 21<sup>st</sup> panzer.

Having regard to the progress of the fight, Rommel could no longer afford to operate in the southern sector. The danger of a breakthrough in the North required any attention and moving mobile forces toward El Alamein impacted on the availability of mechanized troops. He arrested the right with the *Littorio* in Bab el Qattara, the bulk of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light at Jebel Kalakh and the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 33<sup>rd</sup> recon group on the El Taqa plateau, with advanced elements of several kilometers.

The fighting between July 10 and 12 was greatly confused, in part provided the unit committed relationships were very vague and inaccurate, in part because of the fragmented nature of the action, in part also for the mixed up with battle groups of various kinds and provenance. All this results in an unsatisfactory reconstruction of events. Therefore we will just mention the main aspects of what really was warned as dramatic moment.

At 04:30 of the 11<sup>th</sup> the 26<sup>th</sup> Australian Brigade, reinforced by a squadron of *Valentine* and accompanied by three regiments of Australian field artillery and one South African, as well as a Medium Artillery Regiment, moves to complete the occupation of Tell el Eisa. It managed to touch the goal but the strength of the Axis forces, who continued to arrive in dribs and drabs to fill

the containment line, blocked any possibility of expanding success. In this context the II/66<sup>th</sup> Infantry *Trieste*, disoriented condition that come at night and without contact with the Germans in which it was inserted, was surprised and overwhelmed.

At the same time, an extremely heterogeneous mechanized Australian column, named *Daycol*, had started at 05:30 an incursion towards the ridge of Miteiriya. Found and passed the first hurdle of a few infantry companies, then continued in the effort until it was shut down in the early afternoon by an intense and accurate artillery barrage. According to the official Australian report, He fell back at 13:30 after destroying eight Italian guns and captured 1,024 prisoners, mostly Italians<sup>(58)</sup>. If the incursion was carried out more or less astride the track on Naqb Abu Dweis, the report misses real feedback, since the direction to Sanyet el Miteiriya was barred by the XXXII Battalion of Sappers and III/62<sup>nd</sup> Infantry *Trento*, who were engaged only in the afternoon. Most likely, instead, *Daycol* picked up the fruit of previous day's maneuver: moving towards the Northwest, rather than towards the Southwest, could eliminate the pocket created, including two companies of the II/85<sup>th</sup> infantry, much of the XI/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and III/3<sup>rd</sup> rapid artillery.

At about 16:00 were invested, as just mentioned, the cornerstones of the XXXII sappers battalion and III/62<sup>nd</sup> Infantry. This time the action was South Africa. In the morning, Gen. Ramsden did not pull our punches here to compare the success of Australians with very thin results of the South Africans, and had suggested the intervention of one or two brigades southward. Pienaar, sought and obtained the assignment of 16 *Valentine*, in addition to 8 *Matilda* already received, outlined a rather cumbersome plan. A column of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade - column *Matie* under the command of Gen. Du Toit had to attack the ridge of Miteiriya, establish a foothold, then heading northeast of El Wishka and take full advantage of the effects of the initiative. At the same time a tactical group, 1st Brigade, *Royal Natal Carbineers* based, had to act in the area of Alam el Onsol. The hasty preparation of the columns leads to complications and delays of an hour on the expected, however at 16:30 the attack started. If your organization had left something to be desired, the execution was even worse and was stopped by shooting barrage of the 46<sup>th</sup> Artillery of the *Trento*. At this point the Gen. Du Toit stated “*that the entire operation had become a farce*” and cut it short, withdrawing his men<sup>(59)</sup>. As for the *Carbineers*, concluded shortly too and soon returned to their pass.

Overall the situation in the field of the XXI Corps remained rather serious, even if it was believed to be an effort exercised by the 8<sup>th</sup> army with purposes of solution and that it would be powered with reinforcements whose quick arrival in Egypt he had news. Based on these considerations, Rommel ordered the placement of entire *Trieste* on the left of the *Trento*, the *Littorio* Southeast of El Mreir and 21st *Panzer* at Deir el Shein.

Overall the Italian losses of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> in the northern sector amounted to the following:

*Sabratha* Inf. Div.: two battalions (700 men), three artillery groups (550 men and 25 pieces);

*Trieste* Inf. Div.: a battalion (250 men);

Corps troops: 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Command and two companies (350 men), III/24<sup>th</sup> artillery (20 men and 5 pieces).

Now you should explicitly speak of the events that had engulfed some units, especially as it will be repeated in the near future. It is of course regrettable episodes which burden for some organic background notes, negative and psychological training. Don't mind them, but ignore them would not be correct. Instead of commenting on them, however, he chooses to report as telegraphed, in his time, from the Mancinelli to the Comando Superiore

“(…) After what happened to the *Sabratha* – commutated on the 11<sup>th</sup> - & this morning at the *Trieste* battalion, Field Marshal Rommel called Corps commanders to strictly apply Italian laws for punishing culprits & responsible. The fact is that, while serious crisis in which the Army is due to *certain* misconduct, no action is being taken and there is a strong tendency to cover for pride pitifully the truth. This goal was not achieved as long as the truth is equally known & if ever altered sense unfavorable to us.

Past events are evidently produced by complex factors. Among these undoubtedly fatigue factor. However, it remains unjustified apprehensiveness infantry organized defense against appearance of a few tanks, hypersensitivity to cornerstones encirclement, a tendency of not immediately engaged the retreating transform what would be unfortunate local incident. Also the salient known phenomenon of constantly stragglers without individual weapons therefore not immediately recovered and, often accompanied by their officers who passively follow the mass.

XXI Corps command is valiantly working to restore yesterday's situation. I also point to the valiant demeanor of the 99<sup>th</sup> battery of 149/40 that has much helped arrest the opponent<sup>7(60)</sup>.

Bastico responded immediately, reserving an exemplary action against those responsible, once completed the investigations underway, but in the search for explanations of the matter emphasized the "*poor compliance with organic links, as I have stated in the description*"

*of the situation that I sent and instructed to"* instructed Mancinelli to *"call attention to what A.I.T. Command, since this is principles that we have a very high material value and which have for many years pursued"*<sup>(61)</sup>. Which much better would have been shown in a direct conversation with Rommel.

The 12<sup>th</sup>, Mancinelli continued on the topic:

"(...) Causes indicated concur certainly determine crisis resistance units. Situation indeed east enough to require immediate use every Italian & German unit. This situation will be prolonged course, the operations should lead us to be victorious developments, or force us maintain radiant position. I do not think therefore that Marshal Rommel has an alternative in the troop use.

It may be noted, moreover, that the common causes of fatigue affects different units differently in revealing different value compared to the commanders. Allow me to express this judgment believing me authorized to do so by conditional form your last encrypted radio message.

Marshal Rommel sent following secret order to Cops Commands, it begins. Multiply cases where soldiers vilely abandon the battleground without a fight. I await the Corp Commanders that they intervene immediately with tougher classes, according to Italian military penal code, in order to overcome serious crisis. It is not the case to move the front back for penalty of death. Ends.

Severe warning of a foreign Commander could perhaps be made less scathing and at the same time more effective through direct contact with the Comando Superiore to the commands & the troops in the line.

Missing, as there can possibly be rest shifts to send troops at least tangible recognition signs of stress in the form general comfort (wine!), cash prizes, some immediate, award some reward licenses to officers & troops deployed in the field"<sup>(62)</sup>.

As expressed with tact, poor impression generated by the top commander's physical remoteness acquired very clearly. The Comando Superiore cares of the army was granted, but just as undeniable was among the troops the feeling-wrong, but still exists-of little interest, low speed troubleshooting by the highest authority in North Africa. This remarked the next day Barbasetti replied, stating to Mancinelli, *"for your knowledge"*, that the Comando Superiore ensured permanent direct contact with large units in line through the liaison officers, information operations, propaganda Office; the propaganda Office was working every possible moral and material assistance and that the commanders of large units were authorized to grant reward licenses to those meritorious in the field. A discussion about it would be rather



far away. Let's support, unfortunately without fear of contradiction, that moral action, moral and material assistance as well as personnel, Government generally were made with a lot of good will but 'by ear' and that a comparison with the Anglo-Saxon armies (apart, of course, economic possibilities) is painfully negative to us.

About the influx of reinforcements to the AIT, it is necessary to recognize the massive effort from the Comando Superiore to start a total of 18 battalions, including two of three of the new Constitution; 70 medium tanks, 12 semoventi 75/18 and 3 armored cars with its crew; three groups of artillery and heavy weapons of the units. Moreover, there is no doubt that between the first line and Tobruk, and particularly in divisional and bases of Corps, there were several isolated elements or groups without precise orders of affluence or stops; as well as the recovery of heavy weapons and tanks did not happen with the necessary care.

And we observe that not always inserting new battalions showed wise decision, under the conditions in which it was made, provided that they do not always establish they had been followed by the *necessary* stage of training and amalgam. The *Sabratha* can represent an example to be avoided: recently restored to life after the annihilation of 1941, had drawn extensively what was found in the backline, getting so many collected elements, demoralized, tired for a long stay in the colony, poorly trained and with large number of defects. Although certain units, such as the I/85<sup>th</sup> infantry, behaved well, the lack of solidity of the Division (also very incomplete) may not surprise, especially under the circumstances that we know. On the other hand, even in the opponent's brigades were smashed in a brief clash due to deficiencies in training and amalgam.

On 12 July, at 17:00, he made an attempt to restore the line of the 9<sup>th</sup>. From the Northwest, the coastal road, had to advance the X/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri between the road and the sea, the 382<sup>nd</sup> German infantry at the Center, the I/85<sup>th</sup> infantry on the right. At the same time, the *Trento* would open gaps in their own minefields to allow the transition to 21st *Panzer*, that the next day would attack El Alamein.

The progression begun on time, but took place slowly due to resistance from the 26th Australian Brigade, and at dusk, stood with a gain of about 800 meters. More obstacles

were encountered by the German 382<sup>nd</sup> Inf., whose battalion of the left lost the Commander of battalion and all company commanders except one, declining to just over the strength of a company. Hill 23 of Tell el Eisa was occupied by the I/85<sup>th</sup> Inf., but Hill 25 remained in enemy hands (sketch No. 59). On the other hand the evening arrived the I/86<sup>th</sup> Inf.

While the information service of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army reported heavy traffic on a coastal road in the direction of the frontier-much to induce to think about preparations for a withdrawal of the AIT-Rommel had decided to launch the 21st *Panzer* against the El Alamein *box*. If it was good, he would have taken half the cornerstone, solving the major problem of undermining the British line; If bad, would cut off, so he thought, the Australian salient. In this way, said the plan could be acceptable, but simply reflect the conditions under which poured the *Panzerdivisionen* although strengthened by the additions, to realize the over-ambition of the plan. You have already seen and you will see that the violence of the artillery barrage was becoming the major obstacle. As if that weren't enough, Auchinleck knew, from eavesdropping, the course of navigation of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*.

The attack began at noon on the 13<sup>th</sup>, preceded by a bombardment by Stukas and Ju. 88 and a preparation carried out by all the Italian and German artillery available, and to the Northwest the 382<sup>nd</sup> German infantry and I/85<sup>th</sup> Infantry of the *Sabratha* pinned the 26th Australian Brigade. Unfortunately the 104<sup>th</sup> Rifle of the 21st *Panzer* deployed too early, so it was unable to immediately exploit the effects of bombing. Despite the recurrence of raids and the intervention of the 5<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment*, at 17:30 the 104<sup>th</sup> Rifle asks to withdraw could not endure further the arrest fire of the Australians and South Africans, and soon even the 5<sup>th</sup> Tank was unable to break through despite having obtained some advantage. Rommel did pick up the 21<sup>st</sup> at Deir el Shein, proposing to renew the operation the following day.

On the afternoon of the 14<sup>th</sup>, therefore, the attack was repeated. But this time the direction of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* was moved to the left of the *Trieste*, with the aim of cutting the base of Australian salient. The *Sabratha* (with X/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, the I/85<sup>th</sup> Infantry and the just arrived I/86<sup>th</sup> Infantry) and the German 382<sup>nd</sup> Infantry had adjust pressure depending on their progression gradually developed from the 21<sup>st</sup>. The results of the new trial were decidedly modest, despite the great efforts. However, the I/85<sup>th</sup> recovered the 149/28 pieces lost the day of the 10<sup>th</sup>.

LA SITUAZIONE NEL SETTORE DI TELL EL EISA  
LA SERA DEL 12 LUGLIO

In the southern sector of the front was pushed eastward by ten to fifteen kilometers. Operated, departing from Ruweisat, the Baade KG of 164<sup>th</sup> German Division; then the XX Corp with a tactical group of the *Ariete* and one of the *Littorio*; further south the Menton KG of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light and 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn. At about 19:00, which had not encountered major opposition, ended.

### 3. THE FIRST BATTLE OF RUWEISAT (15-17 July)

According to the information service of the Comando Superiore, the British forces in Egypt were divided into two blocs. For El Alamein we calculated 25 battalions, 256 artillery pieces and 170 tanks; the line Amiriya -Wadi Natrun-El Fayum is believed located 23 battalions, 96 pieces and no tanks.

These values do not seem likely any significant increase until the arrival, scheduled for the end of August, large reinforcements reported traveling from Britain and the United States, apart from minor convoys whose supply could not change the magnitude of current troops.

Staying in Libya, in an operating environment that flashed by alternated reasons no doubt hopes, was beginning to weigh to Mussolini. While not wanting to go to the ALT Command, would have liked to know exactly the views and intentions of Rommel about the immediate future and the resumption of the offensive:

“Import especially know- Barbasetti wrote to Mancinelli on July 13- how long the Marshal considers it necessary to still wait for reconstitution, artillery units and affluence which I have highlighted in reordering et complements, and turnout for reordering services before launch new attack intended to take up the advanced to the Nile”.<sup>(63)</sup>

This also because they had to get materials for restoration of Capuzzo -Alexandria, barges for coastal traffic, Italian and German tanks, parachute battalions and possibly another division.

The next day, therefore, Mancinelli stood by Rommel and put on the table the questions formulated by the Comando Superiore. The Marshal laid out his thoughts without circumlocution. It was not possible an indication, albeit approximate, being about offensive shooting, this being conditional on completion of the Italian and German divisions and the influx, possibly, other large units. For the German side

it took at least two to three weeks; It would have been useful a guidance framework of time calculated for the Italian divisions. In the meantime, he wanted to make sure the balance close to El Alamein in the narrow stretch, trying each day to impose his initiative on the enemy with tactical measures limited in time and space. In this regard, claimed that the attack of the 13<sup>th</sup>, although failed, had induced Auchinleck transferring in the northern sector the main mass of the forces available, arranged in echelons for a defense in depth; and considered 'decisive' action of that same 14<sup>th</sup> tending to align the right wing of the army with the Ruweisat position. In addition, with the other scheduled transaction North for that evening, was designed not only to improve the local situation, but also to create uncertainty about the enemy intentions of AIT to the North and South.

However, Rommel did not consider being able “*to proceed offensively before total army completion, unless particular circumstances may accelerate the time*”. The information in the possession of the AIT if they anticipate little resistance in front of El Alamein, induced to consider more than likely a new battle for Cairo. This entailed the need of an army in full efficiency, with a logistical support absolutely to the point.

In such a vision, and where circumstances had made possible the resumption of the advance, he would have proceeded only with the army's mobile parts, leaving the infantry divisions to protect the positions of the moment, as a precaution. Of course, once that Cairo had been conquered, the infantry would soon join the motorized and armored divisions. Meanwhile, it was necessary to strengthen in place with *widespread* recourse to minefields (the 50,000 already promised not enough mines 50,000 mines already promises were not enough) and barbed wire. In conclusion, “*Marshal Rommel, summarizing his impressions, judging the current situation, though difficult, basically favorable*” said Mancinelli. Which, upon completion of this information it touched a important button. He had done the exact idea that Rommel was not at all, at least for the time being, to use the parachute battalions of expected influx according to the characteristics of the specialty, but simply as choice infantry. As a result, much more appropriate to assign it to the AIT seemed an equal number of infantry battalions and keep the paratroopers as a Comando Superiore reserve. <sup>(64)</sup>

It is worth noting that Rommel's optimism was based on a not very precise reconstruction of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army dispositions, at least judging from the news report of the command AIT of 14 July.

In the northern sector is considered present the 10<sup>th</sup> Army Corps with the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division (which seemed to have replaced the 2<sup>nd</sup> South African) and 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. In the Center and South had been spotted the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp with 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. On the location of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division, which they knew withdrew from the line, there were no signs. The general attitude was considered defensive.

Without wishing to give too much weight to statements that couldn't go free from propaganda, tones on the morning of the 14 July Rommel remarked to a group of Italian journalists at El Daba that although it is a hard fight, he was calm because it had to resolve it within a few days; now the gates of Egypt were in the hands of the Axis and had no intention let them take away; that the enemy had big problems such as India, the Caucasus and the battle of the Atlantic. And because the opponent was forced to make a half turn of the world to supply the Middle East, before he could muster on the Egyptian front the necessary number of his «Halbaffen» (lit.: half-apes), there was time to achieve success and this was secure ("*davon bin ich ganz sicher*"). In conclusion:

“The solution – he said - can come at any moment, as can come after a certain period of appearance [= of arrest]; This, I repeat, does not mean anything: why we are here, we will stay there and we firmly hold the keys of Egypt. I have absolute certainty in victory. This is what I can say” <sup>(65)</sup>.

On the British side, there was more of a fix, even in relation to the fear of seeing the Germans struck from the Caucasus or from Turkey. On 12 July Churchill had written to Auchinleck to express the material impossibility to send more troops, beyond those already on or planned for August, before the end of October. Concerns about the Germans rampaging in the Middle East Theatre of Russian operations could be resolved only by defeating Rommel or at least forcing him to back up a '*safe distance*' from the Delta. Beating Rommel became imperative.

In this climate, more precisely on July 13, when wiretaps revealed the presence of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* at the extreme north end front of El Alamein, he had the problem of Ruweisat. An hour after meeting the mentioned particular Auchinleck telegraphed Brooke:

“German troops seem highly dispersed, now with the 21st *Panzerdivision* in the North, the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light Division to the South; so I am going to

take the opportunity to strike hard at favorable center against the Italians. My intention is to attack the Italians everywhere possible, given their low morale and because the Germans cannot be extended without fronts by them“.<sup>(66)</sup>

Having lightened the Italian-German pressure South of Deir el Shein and persisting in the threat in the area of El Alamein Rommel to prevent the recovery of mobile troops, Auchinleck had just time to “*break the central sector of the opponent and destroy his forces East of the El Alamein-Abu Dweis and North of the Ruweisat Ridge*”<sup>(67)</sup>.

The operation was divided between the two Corps, with general direction Northwest-Southeast and gravitation of the effort on the left, saw that it was essentially to occupy hill 63, on the West end of Ruweisat (sketch No. 60). It was not an Army-wide coordination except for the artillery. The Italian-German deployment was incompletely known, however considered low quantitative texture.

Gen. Gott gave to the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div. the conquest of hill 63 and the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. the protection to the left of the New Zealanders and exploitation of success towards the North, from dawn onwards, where it was presented with the opportunity.

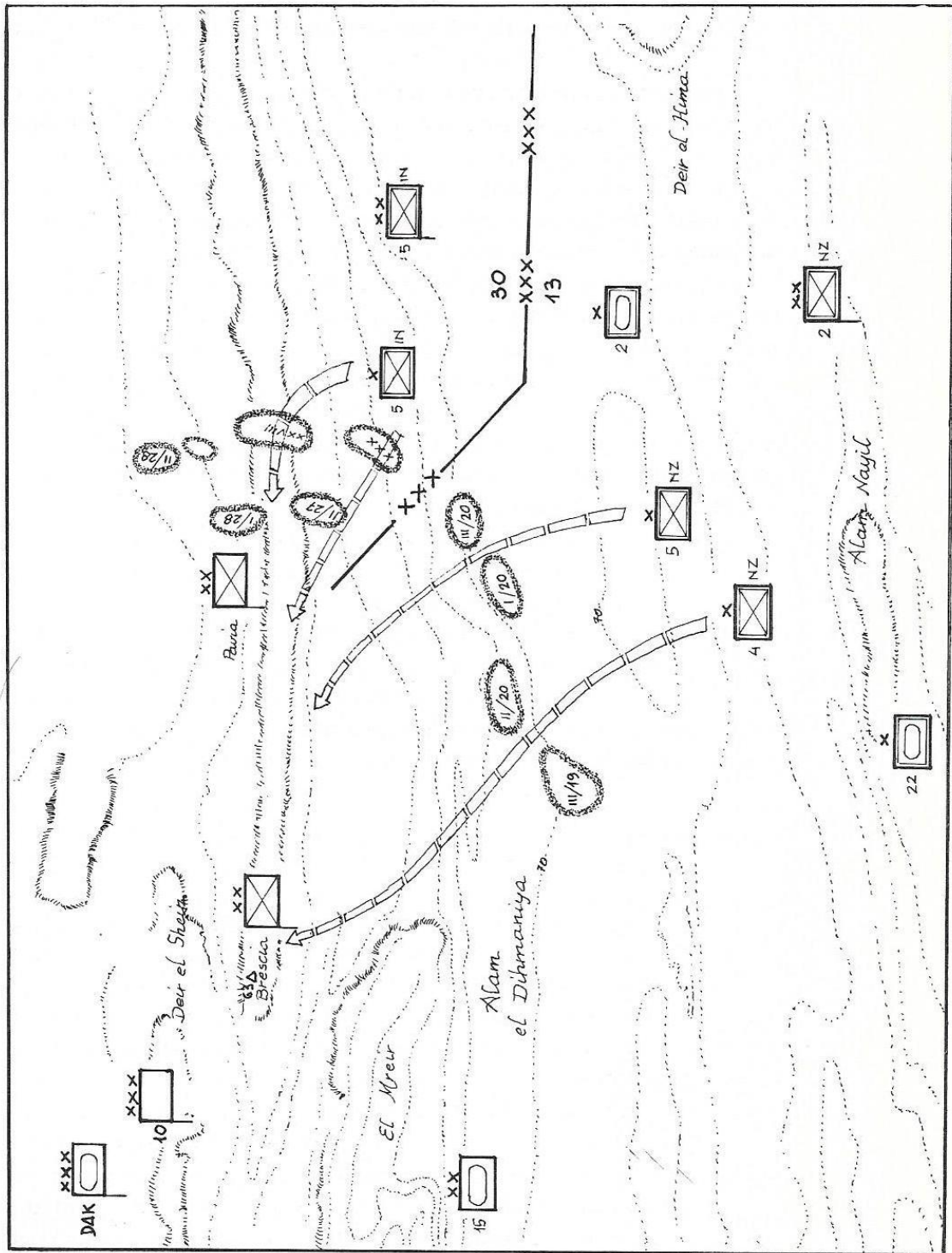
Gen. Ramsden sent the Indian 5<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. to complete the occupation of the central part of Ruweisat and to support the right of New Zealanders. In addition, in conjunction with stress mentioned, the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Div. had to develop a distinct operation from Tell el Eisa salient in order to take over El Miteiriya, but especially to keep the enemy engaged in that area. For the 15<sup>th</sup> at 04:30, i.e. before sunrise, he calculated accomplished the conquest of the Ruweisat.

On the ridge the Italian X Corps was completing the defensive organization with units in influx. Because it is so far very little talked about, it is appropriate to examine the physiognomy. As of 14 July it consisted of ten infantry battalions instead of the twelve that should have had, two riflemen, eight divisional battery against fifteen heavy batteries, two organic field btys instead of the nine scheduled for 16<sup>th</sup> grouping assigned to the Corps. The services were nearly in place, except for the vehicles. The two divisions had five or six trucks each, very worn out efficient and kept alive with continuous repairs. The high hopes raised by vehicles of war booty were unfortunately vanished because the faulty ability to replace and maintain acceptable conditions in such facilities and the shortage of spare parts had caused the abandonment of most of them.

The first battle of Ruweisat (15-17 July)

IL PRIMO COMBATTIMENTO DEL RUWEISAT  
(15-17 luglio)

Schizzo n. 60





The Corps was placed at right angles, with the *Pavia*, reinforced by the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, in the middle straddling the Ruweisat, facing East; and *Brescia* to the South of the Ridge, facing South. The latter Division sector had a width of about 10 km, the other was slightly narrower. The deployment of *Pavia*, North of which was the 200<sup>th</sup> German infantry, included the II/28<sup>th</sup> Inf., XXVIII, and XXX/9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri in the first line; the I/28<sup>th</sup> and II/27<sup>th</sup> in second. Following the arrival in the area of a battalion assigned to 27<sup>th</sup> infantry counterparts as his III battalion, this was supposed to replace overnight the XXVIII Bersaglieri bn., who would pass into Corps reserve. The *Brescia* had the III/19<sup>th</sup> Inf., II/20<sup>th</sup> Inf., I/20<sup>th</sup> Inf. and III/20<sup>th</sup> Inf. in the first line; one company of I/20<sup>th</sup> Inf. in second. Unlike the mainstays of the *Pavia*, the static structures of *Brescia* were more extensive and therefore virtually unmanned on the front of the gully. On the back of the divisions, the 26<sup>th</sup> artillery of the *Pavia* with two groups and 1<sup>st</sup> Quick Artillery of the *Brescia* with three groups; centrally located the XLIX/16<sup>th</sup> Corps artillery.

Altogether in the battalions there were about 4,000 men; those first echelon controlled a field of 1,500-2,000 meters with intervals of equal size. In front of the line, especially at the two large units joints, was still ongoing the laying of approximately 9,000 anti-tank mines. As a unit of German pioneers had stayed in the area to work, the tasks were divided: Italian engineers were provided only to the delimitation of minefields, the Germans to the rapid laying of mines in the Interior.

## JULY 15

On the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> at 23:00, the two New Zealand brigades left in first row starting bases, reaching almost unnoticed behind the advanced elements of the *Brescia*, intent to wire and stringing of delimitation of minefields. The surprise undoubtedly existed, at least partially, and was facilitated by the nocturnal environment and probably by revealing, during the day, earthworks on New Zealand positions considered symptoms of stillness.

The opening of the enemy fire, shortly after midnight, was carried out by the sudden artillery and fire bases; illuminating rockets created visibility while gusts of tracers indicate directions of attack. To be honest the assault was neither quick nor systematic; which does not mean that it was not effective. The small study of

Italy and the existence of large very poorly controlled intervals resulted in action a unintended tactic of infiltration, though rich in tangible results.

The very first telephone news received the command of the X Corps gave to Gioda immediate sensation of what was happening: the first, and only, line of the *Brescia* was exceeded in several places. Subsequent communications informed that the cornerstones were invested from multiple directions and the first enemy elements were already on the Divisional artillery. After that all phone and radio contact with *Brescia* was interrupted permanently. The situation was soon to get worse. If the cornerstones of the 20<sup>th</sup> infantry continued to fight, although isolated and without artillery support, now overwhelmed, the III/19<sup>th</sup> withdrew. Was a battalion additions, arrived that day and posted in the regiment as III battalion, little or no training and commanded or framed only by a few reserve officers; rightly Gen. Lombardi complained by similar assignment, when at Tobruk and Bardia was the entire 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry, of which insistently asked for transportation.

Lombardi attended the events unfold without a unit with which to react. One, indeed, would have had: the XXVIII Bersaglieri battalion, which replaced by III/27<sup>th</sup> Inf., was to move towards Deir el Shein. However remained engulfed in chaos and struggle the remains gathered a little further north, but disappeared as an element of maneuver. As if that weren't enough, the same command of the Division was surrounded and captured. Now the front of *Brescia* was overrun and the enemy penetrated for a few kilometers, finding themselves behind the *Pavia*. Before dawn, in a tactical environment of considerable confusion, the 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade of Gen. Kippenberger had reached the central part of Ruweisat and 4<sup>th</sup> of Gen. Burrows hill 63; After that it began sifting of the battlefield for the disposal of remaining strongholds left standing (the majority).

Meanwhile the *Pavia* was addressed by 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade (Gen. Russell). Shortly after midnight, the command X Corps warned that *Brescia* was subjected to strong pressure and urged replacement of the XXVIII/9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri by III/27<sup>th</sup> Inf., which proceeded rather slowly. Around midnight and a half, suddenly, all the southern sector of the Division was invested. However, the *Pavia* enjoyed a largely satisfactory accommodation and with the right structures (XXX/9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, II and III/27<sup>th</sup> Inf.), close to the *Brescia*, were assaulted and subsequently from the East, South and West, was able to sustain the enemy momentum for some time. At dawn the Division resisted with

the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry still intact; the II/27<sup>th</sup> Inf. surrounded but efficient; the III/27<sup>th</sup> Inf. reduced to a couple of companies because, caught in full deployment and crisis with ammunition and parts of heavy weapons still on vehicles, a part of it was crushed; the XXX/9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri instead had been overwhelmed.

It appears from British sources, although the operation was coming to full result, between the New Zealand and Indian file was great disorder.

The 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade had partly interspersed; internal links didn't work; the goal was taken but behind the first echelon battalions remained numerous Italian strongholds still active. The 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade had also achieved his objective with the battalion advanced on the right, but the left one was completely lost and almost all were anti-tank pieces back; also suffered from the same lack of communication already mentioned for the 4th Brigade. The 6<sup>th</sup> then constituted the reserve and to the southwest of it stood the entire divisional artillery, with few problems of range.

With regard to the two brigades of the 1st Arm. Div., believed already moving, stationed still awaiting orders, the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the West of Deir el Hima<sup>(68)</sup> and the 22<sup>nd</sup> at Alam Nayil<sup>(69)</sup>.

The AIT Command was trying to orient themselves. The first alarmed was Nehring. Originally, the army had planned further development of action in the southern sector, starting at 05:30. The main objective was to be Deep Well and were to converge at the Menton from Bab el Qattara and the Baade KG (115<sup>th</sup> rifle with two battalions and an artillery group) from the area north of Jebel Kalakh. Between the two, the XX corps: the *Littorio* with the task to participate in the Menton Group's advance; the *Ariete* to protect the left of the Menton and stay ready, once Deep Well was occupied, moving towards the North-East or North, in conjunction with the Group Baade on the right and a column of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* to the left, to establish contact with X Corps. The overall action was accompanied by the artillery of 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and the X Corps deployed on Ruweisat. Further south acted the Briel Group and a part of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, operating temporarily under Command by Col. Lungershausen, in place of Gen. Kleemann, ill.

The unexpected New Zealand attack forced the plan to change course and at 06:00 De Stefanis received order from Nehring, commissioned by Rommel of "enemy infiltration rake", to stop the movement of the *Ariete* and the *Littorio*. The two divisions, or rather the Battlegroups

organized by them, they simply push exploring elements eastward and, faced with the emergence of a predominant opposing pressure, withdraw immediately to Bab el Qattata.

In the circumstances, therefore, Nehring began to employ in central sector 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, commanded now by Gen. von Randow, replacing Gen. von Vaerst, wounded. But meanwhile, right at the first light of dawn, he recorded an episode in favor of North of Alam el Dihmaniya. A company of the 5<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment*, with a dozen tanks, suddenly appeared on the rear of the 2/22<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand battalion and in a short furious battle knocked out the 6 pounds four guns, passed to the assault. The battalion surrendered en masse<sup>(70)</sup>.

At the same time, the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade was forced to suspend the advance. The III/10<sup>th</sup> *Baluch Regiment* was unable to overcome the resistance of the strongholds of the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry, while the IV/6<sup>th</sup> *Rajput Rifles*, left battalion, which from the outset had already disjointed, received on the fire of the II/27<sup>th</sup> Inf. and the I/26<sup>th</sup> artillery, so having to withdraw in disorder.

The two sides set out to take the necessary measures to resolve the situation left in a unstable equilibrium. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corp needed the intervention of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., already provided. The DAK needed to find to the North and South mobile troops, which had not been planned at all. So throughout the morning and early afternoon the initiative was in British hands; at 17:00 it passed to the axis.

Gen. Lumsden, heard from the temporary Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div., Gen. Inglis, that the conduct of the operation wasn't exactly as expected, ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. (Gen. Briggs) to enter in the field between the 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Bd. and 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Bd. It seems that two regiments of Briggs have become embroiled in the minefields and into the arresting fire from a remnant of the *Brescia*, however still the third joined the Indians, who were reassembling the attack.

At 10:00 the II/27<sup>th</sup> Infantry and I/26<sup>th</sup> Artillery cease to resist. Shortly after 11:00 the remains of the III/27<sup>th</sup> Inf. flowed on the I/28<sup>th</sup> Inf, which prepared a defensive against forces coming from the South, to contain the crumbling of *Pavia*. Early in the afternoon, two-thirds of the Ridge was in enemy hands.

To the West the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade were restoring order in the respective file. Had occupied hill 63, had pushed up to Deir el Shein, but were in crisis because the midway between the slopes of Ruweisat, near Alam el Dihmaniya and somewhat wherever they resisted, isolated from one another, different centers of resistance of the 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry, which hindered the persistent attempts of the New Zealanders

to advance armored and wheeled vehicles. It took the intervention of the Divisional reserve and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., but both were more or less engaged against the first German units in place. The Elimination of small pockets was slow: "*Gradually, however, the opposition was reduced by artillery fire and, one by one, the various positions were occupied. At 16:00 some vehicles started to arrive at the ridge*".<sup>(71)</sup>

To Italian and German commands the situation was very confused. At 09:00 they knew only that the *Pavia* still held and the breakthrough of *Brescia* was substantial, so much so that New Zealanders were looking at Deir el Shein. There were references to a specific course of action and formulate any appreciation on the extent of enemy success. Gen. Lombardi, managed to escape, adventurously, those who had captured him, before falling severely wounded by a raid of the *Royal Air Force*, been able to bring a few lights due to sudden interruption of connections with the units since the beginning of the attack. At 13:00 Mancinelli cabled the *Comando Superiore*:

“Central Sector situation very serious. Enemy content Southeast of Deir el Shein has though obtained new advantages on *Pavia* which partly had to give. Counteraction from the West and from the South in preparation offers opportunities for success only if *Brescia* margins held firm.

Even the German 21st Division and other Germans units of the North sector are rushing there. Of course the situation could become critical if concomitant attack grew the northern sector. Returning news on the British fleet Alexandria induces Marshal Rommel think action landing possibilities on the reverse face of against whom nothing to oppose”.<sup>(72)</sup>

Luckily, the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division did not carry out the operation ordered towards El Miteiriya, perhaps because they were diverted from an episode of 21st *Panzer* to broaden the ownership of Tell el Eisa. At 04:15 the 5<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment* had started a new attempt with what was left and together with the German II/104<sup>th</sup> Riflemen. Some small progress had been achieved, but the clashes will soon abate and gave way to intermittent artillery duels.

When the news from Ruweisat became alarming, Rommel sent Nehring the 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn. and some part of 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* from the North; the 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn. and the Baade KG from the South. With these units and with the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, which already was battling against the New Zealanders, Nehring organized a counterattack that began at 17:00.

The German shock, facilitated by the smoke that enveloped the battlefield

and by a light sandstorm, engraved first the 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade, which was overwhelmed and lost the Commander of the Brigade and other 380 men, and then at stake, hill 63; then on 5<sup>th</sup>, which partly managed to avoid the downside. At 18:15 finally a regiment of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. appeared at Alam el Dihmaniya, but it was late and the shadows of evening suspended the fighting.

At 21:00 the panorama of the day appeared at the AIT "*greatly improved*" as informed Mancinelli. To the North the line was unchanged, even after the departure of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and other German units. At the Center, the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri linked the right of the *Trento* to the Southwest with Deir el Shein, where they had collected the remains of the *Brescia*, and the South section of the *Pavia*. Between Deir el Shein and Alam el Dihmaniya he had set the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*. In the southern area the line now ran from El Mreir (*Ariete*), to Bab el Qattara (*Littorio*) to Gebel-El Taqa Khalakh (90<sup>th</sup> Light). The 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* remained West of Deir el Shein.

“Tomorrow Marshal Rommel meant the CTA to reach the old line- Mancinelli telegraphed - essentially in order to pick up materials and possibly even men remaining in the lost zone. Later it is likely fold line of the cornerstones indicated cheapest. Successful operation, acknowledged the army will remain in serious crisis for deficiencies of large infantry units after today's losses, in connection with line width & need release mobile units. I need to visit his Excellence the Chief of G.S. for complete examination of the situation”<sup>(73)</sup>.

Which the analysis? The New Zealand 2<sup>nd</sup> Division declared the capture of 1,600 prisoners, but the climate was such that Kippenberger judged to have had in his hand, at first, a good 4,000 and Burrows said, conquered Ruweisat, there would even been taken 20,000 prisoners!<sup>(74)</sup>. In any case, Kippenberger said, “*There was also a huge number of dead, more Italians dead than I've ever seen on a battlefield, and many Germans because Germans generally fought to the death*”<sup>(75)</sup>.

Even New Zealand losses were far from indifferent, because it was a good 1,045 men, among dead, wounded and prisoners. And even worse, it was entrenching the unpleasant feeling that the British armored were ready to abandon the infantry should decide that its not producing or intervention too dangerous. Explicit admission by the English, the crux was lack of studying, theoretical and practical, effective cooperation between an Armored Division and one or more of the infantry. However among the *Commonwealth* troops remained the belief, psychologically negative, of the British own excessive selfishness.

**JULY 16**

The 16<sup>th</sup> the tension never faded. Around the El Alamein *box* deployment of XXI Corps had suffered some modifications. The *Sabratha* had assumed responsibility for much of the semicircular front on the Tell el Eisa salient availing itself of the Wolz KG, the German I and III/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf., of I/85<sup>th</sup> Inf. and I/86<sup>th</sup> Inf. followed the *Trieste* with I/66<sup>th</sup> Inf., and I/65<sup>th</sup> Inf., under the direct orders of the AIT. Then there was the *Trento* with the 61<sup>st</sup> and 62<sup>nd</sup> infantry.

At approximately 05:30 the 2/23<sup>rd</sup> Australian battalion reinforced with the tanks of 8<sup>th</sup> and 44<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, began the attack on Tell el Eisa backed a violent artillery fire. First invested the I/85<sup>th</sup> Inf., who presided over the hills 25 and 23. The battalion only the day before had lost 124 men between dead and wounded (including 8 officers), and 12 missing, and was reduced to little more than 200 men. After a short resistance had to surrender. Then the Australians, widening the action, they confronted and engulfed part of the German I/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. to the North of the position and the I/86<sup>th</sup> Inf., who was settling a stronghold in the South, in the section already held by 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*. The moment was certainly serious, but at 11:00 a counterattack of the III/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. regained all the lost ground. In the afternoon came the III/39<sup>th</sup> Inf. of *Bologna* and later I/104<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, which was inserted between the 382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and the *Trieste*, in place of the I/86<sup>th</sup> Inf.

Let's say that the condition of the III/39<sup>th</sup> Inf. was not brilliant: about 500 men, all recruits; classification of only completion, officers including the Commander (referred); lack of training, knowledge of the relative few weapons firing drills carried out; the troops tired from six days moving in trucks without a single hot meal. The Commander of the *Sabratha* refused to put it in line and left it in the back for a minimum period of amalgam.

At the center Nehring sought to improve the State of things. An initial statement by the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* to against the New Zealanders was blocked by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade. A second effort, exercised by the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* at 18:00, tasked to the rear of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade, however at about 21:00 came to an end.

**JULY 17**

Italian and German losses in personnel, tanks, and artillery were really heavy. And it wasn't over yet. To divert the DAK from Ruweisat, Auchinleck ordered an immediate resumption of activity on the North by the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian and in the South by the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored.

The task was entrusted to the 24<sup>th</sup> Australian Brigade (Gen. Godfrey); It was to occupy el Makh Khad Tell and continue up to the ridge of Miteiriya. Moved first the 2/32<sup>nd</sup> battalion reinforced by a *Valentine* squadron of the 44<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* and *Crusader* of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. Taking advantage of the last hours of darkness, overwhelmed a small advanced stronghold held by a company of the XI/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, southwest of Naqb Abu Dweis track, then the battalion headed to the Northwest. It was dawn and, while opposing artillery (four regiments of the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian, as many of the 2<sup>nd</sup> South Africa and two British) pounding targets across the front of the XXI Corps, was invested and surrounded the II/65<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Trieste*. The regiment's Commander, Col. Vaiairini, fell mortally wounded while attempting to break the isolation of his unit. A short time later fell severely wounded the Commander of the 66<sup>th</sup> Infantry, Leut. Col. Zanetti. In two regiments remained not only a superior officer.

At the same time the 2/43<sup>rd</sup> battalion, reinforced considerably, also, is deployed in depth astride the track against the XXXII battalion of sappers. Immediately Navarini moved the II/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. from the far right of the *Trento* in support of the Sappers and this measure followed the rush to the threatened Kiehl Group and 3<sup>rd</sup> and 580<sup>th</sup> Recon Bn. for the elimination of the mechanized penetration. At 08:30 the skimpy XXXII sappers battalion was overwhelmed; III/46<sup>th</sup> artillery was annihilated after consuming the last grenades; the I/46<sup>th</sup> artillery was firing at zero.

Mancinelli then telegraphed to Bastico:

“New breakthrough happened later tonight at *Trento-Trieste* junction, overall army situation is judged by Marshal Rommel is very delicate. Marshal Rommel asks urgently Mr. Bastico & possibly & Mr. Cavallero come here today for full examination situation & resulting determinations” (76).

The evolution of the fight remained undecided until 11:00, when the Australian pressure was finally arrested. Shortly before noon the Comando Superiore briefed Mancinelli on the tactical moment, as reported by the AIT command to the OKW:



“(…) Following enemy breakthrough during last days in lines of the Italian Corps and annihilation of almost four Italian divisions, AIT military efficiency is so diminished that it can no longer run offensive acts against an enemy is growing stronger in infantry, tanks and artillery.

If the enemy were to achieve other breakthroughs, El Alamein positions could no longer be kept (...)”<sup>(77)</sup>.

But counterattacks were beginning to give their fruits and the opponent was rejected on the basis of departure, leaving on the ground almost all the material caught in the initial phase and some hundreds of prisoners. Around 13:00 calm returned on the sector of XXI Corps. Two more Australian efforts on Tell el Eisa against the Kiehl KG and further South, and against the left of the *Trieste* (I/65<sup>th</sup> and II/66<sup>th</sup> Infantry) proved futile. The 24th Australian Brigade claimed the capture of 700 prisoners.

The status of the Italian divisions, according to the estimates made in the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup>, was as follows:

X Corps - *Brescia*: a bn., no artillery; *Pavia*: two bn. few means;

XX Corps - *Ariete*: a bn. Bers., 15 tanks, artillery group; *Littorio*: a bn. Bers., 20 tanks, a gun; *Trieste*: three bn. artillery group;

XXI Corps - *Sabrotha*: no bn. complete, no artillery (78); *Trento*: no noticeable loss; Artillery corps: a battery.

The 16 July Mussolini was summoned to Berta Cavallero, Kesselring and Bastico. It's clear that there were doubts and fears and that hovered over the specter of a retreat. The result of the discussions was the following telegram to Rommel, written by Cavallero, approved by Mussolini and signed by Bastico:

“Duce asks me to inform you that::

1<sup>st</sup> - which he has followed with interest efforts by you repeatedly tempted to be correct opposing resistance;;

2<sup>nd</sup> - that he appreciated quick mobile forces against enemy invasion attempt in the middle of our lineup.

3<sup>rd</sup> - believes that it is now necessary, restored after the situation in that sector, refrain from initiatives that subject our troops as infantry mobile forces at further attrition, which would make it difficult to restore their tasks more; this applies in particular to the infantry divisions that live and fight in unusually uncomfortable et suffer most wear;

4<sup>th</sup> - you need to take the deployment that corresponds to the task

above which the Italian-German army must consider fundamental & will in the shortest term possible.

5<sup>th</sup> -which, as already indicated, are underway by the Comando Supremo & SuperASI steps to bring as promptly as possible reinforcements of men and means to ensure continuity of supplies & Italian -German army in corresponding measure at your needs and its future tasks.

I like to add that it is for order Duce, Marshal Cavallero & I will depart tomorrow for seventeen meet with you”.

The resentment for the expressions used by the AIT command in its communication of 16 July to the OKW was meant by Bastico through staff liaison with the Italian AIT. The Commander should be higher, but arguments and suggested remedies don't seem to apply only in part. In fact, the record of events made by Rommel, more than deformed, it was misrepresented in just enough to show all the white on one side (German) all the other black (Italian). But it was not the first time that this happened, nor will it be the last <sup>(79)</sup>. Apart from this consideration, we appreciate very much the tough frankness with which a soldier as the Gen. Gioda turned to his troops after the first battle of Ruweisat <sup>(80)</sup>.

There is no minutes of the meeting held on 17 July at 16:30 in El Daba, therefore it transcribes as Cavallero noted in his diary:

“Field marshal Rommel announced that a few days ago the enemy was already exceeding us in tanks and infantry. He attacked; apparently he doesn't want to make a great action but success was easy and then insisted in action. Our troops were not many, but already in place for some time, with sufficient deployment of artillery and reinforcements of 88 pieces and protection of minefields. Though they were worn out and in front of the enemy's attack suddenly had a little panic. The Italian soldiers have retreated chased by British infantry on a few tanks. A part of ours was surprised asleep and had no shoes. The trucks were insufficient for a withdrawal and then an interception that our company who had not found a place on them was captured..

The attack was stopped thanks to the Leut. Col... [von Mellenthin]. We had to intervene by troops ... to stop the leak. To keep in mind that our Armor Div. are now reduced to little more than a strengthened Bn.. The rest melted away. The location could not be more favorable for us, but the enemy does not leave us time to strengthen.

South so far there have been no serious fighting. Then there is the New Zealand attack in the area of the *Brescia*. The day before yesterday we managed to reestablish the situation taking many prisoners, but we couldn't release the *Pavia* and *Brescia*, whereby these divisions have been reduced to two or three battalions and an artillery group.

Yesterday the CTA stuck to restore the situation in the area, but the action

was tough and you haven't managed to restore the front. Had to decide to adjust the front; However, serious difficulties to oppose withdrawal of the infantry.

This morning the enemy again attacked with two Australian battalions strengthened the front of the *Trento* and *Trieste* penetrating deeply<sup>(81)</sup>. He collected all that was still available to buffer and he succeeded. Now ordered to break contact and withdraw.

The 90<sup>th</sup> Div. will be to the North of the line. South will move the XX Corp. hopes to bring on the night the troops on new positions. The I Bn. of *Sabratha* have folded under the only the fire of enemy artillery which is really brutal. In conclusion, the situation is critical. With the forces still available will try to master it, but if you have other shots as today, can no longer, as the location is the best choice, still dominate the situation.

The enemy is hurt. He had heavy losses and each day has for air action. The winner will be tougher. Necessary influx of forces, complements and units. He asks what reinforcements arrive. In my turn I share with him the measures taken for the railway and for coastal shipping. Mar. Rommel that doesn't guarantee me to wait a week. If you do not get the reinforcements will have to withdraw.

Kesselring points out that a withdrawal would aviation crisis. Rather it will sacrifice all his artillery and will send forward (...).

Rommel replied that the first are 88 pieces and then the Bn. Of paratroopers. Question the situation of tanks and Rommel precise: *Ariete* 12, *Littorio* 16, CTA 30.

Adds that if the front is broken there is no other solution that fighting to play for time”<sup>(82)</sup>.

Tanking one's leave of the visitors, Rommel held connection with Navarini and Nehring. Received reinforcements by the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and its aggressive attitude, he observed, were that the salient of Ruweisat, constituted for the benefit of AIT, was turning into a threat to the left of the army itself. It was not, however, possible to sever the bubble Australian because of ongoing commitments everywhere of the armored divisions. Therefore it was necessary to give up Ruweisat and withdraw the Centre of AIT. The operation was to take place that night, collecting the remains of the X Corps at Deir el Shein.

Rommel was really alarmed and dismayed. Make assurance two letters written to his wife. The first is the evening of the 17 July:

"Right now things are looking really bad for me (...).

The enemy is using his superiority, especially in infantry, to destroy the Italian formations at a time and German units are too weak to stand up for themselves. I want to cry. "

The second on the next day:

"Yesterday was a particularly heavy day and critical. We are once again out. But I can't continue this way for a long time, otherwise the front fall apart. From the operational point of view, is the most difficult period I have ever gone through. There are reinforcements in sight, of course, but if we'll get to see them is another thing. You know what incurable optimist I am. But there are situations where everything is dark. However, this period will pass"<sup>(83)</sup>.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> Cavallero referred to Mussolini the conversation with Rommel. Even here there are no notes or documents, but two things were evident: now that the hope of an imminent rush to the Nile was gone and the presence of Mussolini in Cyrenaica-without having ever talked with Rommel and Italian commanders at the front-had become untenable; that it was necessary to give the greatest impetus to maritime transport in favor of the AIT. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, therefore, Cavallero returned to El Daba with Bastico and Barbasetti.

Bastico recalled few details of the meeting:

"Now," said Rommel, giving just a look at present-the situation is less tense following the overnight decline on stronger positions, but the crisis has not disappeared. Advanced deployment is without depth and I have no reservations. For me, the crisis will be settled only when the reinforcements arrived, I will withdraw from the front of the armored troops and keep them behind as operational reserve (...)"

Cavallero listened to him and giving rein to nervousness drumming his fingers on the table, "*all this would be - exact replies - if reinforcements were not coming.*" Secured the immediate availability of the *Bologna*, replacing the *Sabratha* which was provided for the dissolution, and the *Giovani Fascisti* and imminent or planned parachute Division, of *Pistoia* and the *Brennero*, as well as numerous complements<sup>(84)</sup>, and noted the influx, from the German side, the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., of the Ramcke Parachute Brigade and an anti-aircraft Brigade with 72 - 88 pieces, in addition to Accessories. With a little skeptical, Rommel commented that on this basis, it was possible to establish even a fortified system from the coast to the Qattara depression, drawing on existing building materials at Tobruk and Matruh. Cavallero of course agreed, but wanted to sentence: "*Retreat is a term that needs to be deleted from the vocabulary of war in this area!*", whereupon Rommel replied dryly *It is not of words or terms. The war is done with the means and only with those*"<sup>(85)</sup>.

Bearing in mind that on July 15 a column sent by the garrison of Gialo had pushed up to the oasis of Giarabub was occupying it,

examined the opportunity to take as soon as the oasis of Siwa, to eliminate the main recognizance base and other enemy disturbances.

That evening at 20:20, at Berta, Mussolini received Cavallero, Bastico and Barbasetti, also present Fougier and Kesselring, and listened to the report of Cavallero, delivered a note personally compiled. It was considerations of strategic and tactical character, whose highlights were two:

“1. (...) The battle of Tobruk is closed; tomorrow will be the battle of the Delta. The time to prepare this battle must be numbered in weeks, but we must not lose a minute only time to prepare in this race of speed now engaged between the enemy and ourselves.

2. First *conditio sine qua non*\*, to prepare the new battle is to preserve at any cost the current departure bases. Any other hypothesis must be rejected *a priori*\*\* (...)”<sup>(86)</sup>.

The following day, July 20, Mussolini left for Italy. Around midday a Italian recon group reached Siwa, abandoned by the enemy. In the afternoon the New Zealanders made a new effort at Deir el Shein. At 16:45 began a violent artillery preparation on the positions held by 19<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Brescia*. After half an hour, the intensity of fire diminished and became less frequent the uproar, the I/19<sup>th</sup> inf. saw groups of Germans in disorderly retreat followed closely by the enemy. In order not to hit the battalion's troops opened fire to 300-400 meters, with the assistance of the barrage of shooting remains of the 46<sup>th</sup> artillery and repulsed the attempt, moreover, unconvinced.

In conversations between Cavallero and Rommel states that the first had not mentioned such a question from Berlin about France, whose politics was beginning to provide elements of concern, and presented by von Rintelen to the Comando Supremo so not very clear. In essence, it was ventilated using Italian divisions on the French frontier, even without talking about an occupation of southern France; and naval forces to blockade French and Mediterranean coasts of Corsica. But for Italy, not new specification, requirement had hired prominent importance. On July 7 Cavallero, who at 06:00 returned by plane to Rome for a few days, had placed the transformation of C3 (occupation of Malta) into Need C4 (occupation of Tunisia). Back on topic, however this problem according to von Rintelen, or better according to the OKW, had to be kept separated from the others, almost purely

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\*Latin = Without which not

\*\*Latin = as a result of,

by way of the event where he presented in strict deadlines. The thought of all the Italian leaders in that regard was unanimous: the Tunisia operation was to be made at any cost and above any other, but only to define the campaign in Egypt, which according to Cavallero, seemed “*in the short term*”.

On the prospects of a blazing success in Egypt, it may be interesting to know the oscillations of Mussolini’s sentiment, seen through the comments of Ciano:

20 July: “Roma. Mussolini too, will return in the evening. His return, together with the news from Libyan convinces the public that many rosy dreams about Egypt have faded, at least for the time being. We shall now see if our deployment at El Alamein is wise or not: Some people on the General Staff are considering the advisability of a retreat<sup>(87)</sup> (...) “. [Page 535]

21 July: “The Duce is in a good mood, especially because he believes that within two or three weeks will resume our forward into Egypt and reach the great goals of the Delta and the Canal. He is so certain that he left his personal baggage in Libya, as a guarantee of a quick return (Bismarck, on the other hand, in view of the information from General Rintelen, considers that our offensive postponed for a long time, because the exhaustion of our troops has been very considerable, and because the reinforcements that have reached the English are greater than forecasted).

Naturally, Mussolini has been absorbing the anti-Rommel spirit of the Italian commander in Libya and he lashes out on the German marshal who, by the way, did not pay him a visit during three weeks and more Mussolini spent there. The attitude of the [German] soldiers is also obnoxious. (...)”.

22 July: “Mussolini written a letter to Hitler: an account of his stay in Libya and his visit to Athens. The main purpose of the letter was actually to straighten things out on the matter of our *Sabratha* Division, because Rommel had sent a cable to Germany where he was very critical of it – a cable for which “Mussolini will never forgive him” (...).

Mackensen pays me a visit on some pretext (...). He doesn’t think that the offensive could be resumed before October, and makes many reservations (...)”.

23 July: “I recounted to the Duce the forecasts made by the German Ambassador, After two days of pretended assurances Mussolini has lowered his mask and spoken clearly. He is furious with the military who “*for the second time have made a fool of him by making him visit the front at unfavorable moments*” (Of course he is alluding to his trip to Albania). This time he had given the order to Cavallero to send, by cable, in plain language the word “*Tevere*”, when Cavallero was certain about the advance of our troops toward the Canal. The password “*Tevere*” arrived on Friday, June 27. The Duce has to delay by two days his departure due to a cyclone that prevented the flight. Only when he was on the spot he noticed that things were going and that even “*Rommel's strategy had its ups and downs*”.

The appointment of Cavallero to Marshal could not be avoided because he was “*between Rommel and Kesselring as Christ between the thieves*”. The rest also will be appointed Bastico to field marshal and other generals after him and “*he doesn't exclude even Navarre, my doorkeeper*”.

The forecasts are very cautious,

Mussolini thinks we must avoid any retreat because otherwise we would not know where we would end. "

24 July: "The tone of the Duce's conversations is increasingly anti-German. Today he gave vent to his feeling on two points: a statement by General Marras on the low esteem in which our military is held by the German General Staff and the lack of understanding of our needs and our industrial aspirations (...)" <sup>[Page 537]</sup>

A short comment though on the fulmination of Mussolini on July 23 imposes itself. It is typical of the behavior of the Duce as a politician: not responsible for nothing; the blame is always and only of others. Had *wanted* to bind tightly to Germany and now it supports the sufficiency and the arrogance; *wanted*, not required, go to war (already won by her ally) and now resents that Germany considers poor Italian military contribution, of which he knew to perfection the unreadiness and inadequate; had *wanted* the parallel and war, touched with the absurdity of the question, now complains of incomprehension of the ally for our needs; He *wanted* the highest military rank and command of all armed forces operating and does not realize that the presence of the Commander-in-Chief is much more necessary when things go wrong than when everything goes well; He *wanted* to lead the triumph in Egypt and in the difficult time of backlash as a result of imprisonment imposed by the enemy at El Alamein doesn't think even to visit the commands of the Italian Army Corps-at least the ones-on the frontline, but wrong for failure "courtesy visit" by Rommel; He had *wanted* to travel to Albania and then into Cyrenaica to emphasize to the people and the world that under *his* guidance the armed personnel scampered to victory and didn't realize that even though the war had received help from Mars, all military (friends and enemies) would smile wryly at him.

Mind you: certainly it was also ill-advised. It does not appear that anyone has the distinctly represented the inappropriateness of the trip (as was done in London against Churchill); Some have told him explicitly that a visit to El Daba was far more important than the port facilities of Tobruk or a rear area airport <sup>(89)</sup>. *Entourage's* fears for his personal safety? Likely, but a true leader, political or non-political, it must also be able to risk your skin when you need to.

As for derogatory appreciations on the main military leaders, if it was not satisfied because they maintained those high places responsibility? This is also typical of many politicians: no

they feel responsible for the choices that they make in people. A comparison with other government leaders or dictators of the era does not arise either. They, in uniform or in plainclothes, *commanded* really. Stalin did shoot all the generals defeated, regardless of grade and from any previous merit, the French Revolution; Hitler usually drove them with shame; Churchill at first gave support and comfort then sweeps them away on the spot, but was so honest that and ended up recognizing the merits and mitigating circumstances; Roosevelt, however in some degree intimidated by the giant personality of Gen. Marshall, never hesitate to torpedo commanders who were unable or unlucky. Mussolini instead complained: was comfortable, very comfortable, complaining of being "badly served"!

Gen. Marras, then, had also effectively portrayed as in Germany followed fighting into Egypt:

“The great interest which had aroused in these environments directing the rapid progress of operations in Egypt appears now considerably attenuated. It is difficult to judge whether this depends on slackening suffered from and the difficulties that occur, or the favorable development of operations in Russia, which of course has diverted and strongly drawn attention not only managers but also elements of the public (...)” (90).

#### **4. THE SECOND BATTLE OF RUWEIZAT (21-22 July).**

The service intercepts and *Enigma* messages continued to provide conclusive elements to Auchinleck. Between 17 and 19 July reported that the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* had 17 efficient tanks, the 15<sup>th</sup> just 13 and XX Corps around seventy. Although these were not accurate news and despite knowing that the AIT was considerably strengthened, that repaired tanks came back to the units and that a large quantity of mines were placed in work, it seemed foolhardy deemed the enemy in poor condition and the Italians even on the verge of a collapse. So the timing lends itself to a gesture of strength. A gesture from London was requested.

On July 12 Churchill had sent to Auchinleck a letter somewhere between the incitement and the resignation. All explained, knew only too well how the Japanese threat towards India and the disastrous downside of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had completely unguarded to the northern front in the Middle East, a front that German successes in Russia were making afraid of next actuality. Before the



end of October there was to think they can send on that theater of operations more than a couple of divisions at the maximum, so the only way to the border with Turkey and Russia in terms of an offensive facing German from the North.

“that is to defeat or annihilated the General Rommel or at least the force him back at a safe distance. If this were achieved before the end of September, the Australian and New Zealand divisions could return to their headquarters in Palestine and Syria and the 41<sup>st</sup> Division could be posted directly on the northern front.

We will send the 56<sup>th</sup> Division with convoy of August and we are preparing another Division for the eastern front. A British Division could probably be withdrawn from India, if the Southern Russian side showed signs of subsiding.

You have to admit, however, that if you are unable to defeat and destroy Rommel, there is no possibility to make a sufficient transfer of troops to the North and we should continue to hope only on the Russian Front (...)”<sup>(91)</sup>.

The concept of Churchill you could define only partly convincing: destroying or at least heavily defeating the AIT, the Bill would return. The simple rejection of “*a safe distance*” did not offer some solid collateral. However, in the spirit of these directives Auchinleck examined the underlying problem. It was to identify how to open a breach in the Italian-German front and keep it open to allow deep penetration of the armor mass with the aim of cut Rommel's supply channel or to surround his infantry divisions.

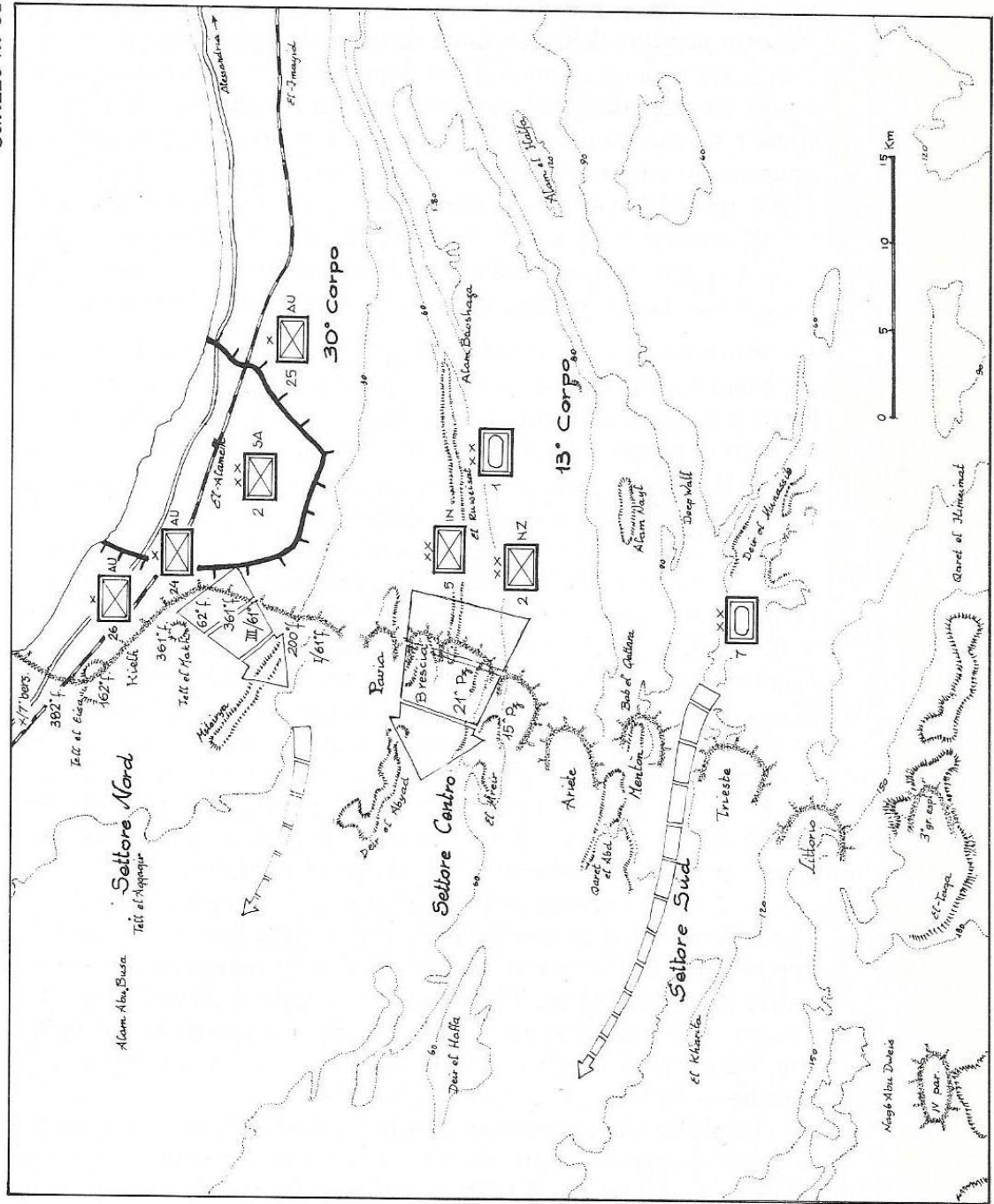
It was part of the opponent's intention to carry out a redeployment of forces, edited so that wherever they registered a British attack, German mechanized units were able to intervene with a counterattack. Then it was necessary to divert those reserves from the area chosen for the break.

In fact, on 19 July Rommel had ordered new partial setbacks to ensure the AIT quiet enough, leaving the current positions also exploring elements like a security echelon.. The new organization provided for a continuing series of battalion cornerstones divided into three sectors (sketch No. 61): Northern entrusted to the Commander of the XXI Corps (German 383<sup>rd</sup> Inf., German 125<sup>th</sup> Inf., *Trento* Inf. Div., III/39<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Bologna*, a tactical group of the 90<sup>th</sup> light and X/7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri), the central assigned command of the DAK (*Brescia* and *Pavia* Inf. Div., 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*) the Southern straight from Command XX Corp (*Ariete* and *Littorio* Arm. Div, *Trieste* Mot. Div, Menton KG, elements of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, IV cacciatori battalion<sup>(92)</sup>.

The opposites sides on 21 July  
And the plan of Auchinlreck

GLI OPPOSTI SCHIERAMENTI IL 21 LUGLIO  
ED IL PIANO DI AUCHINLECK

Schizzo n. 61



Of course the inclusion of new units, replacing other, transferring others involved a series of movements are not always feasible in restricted periods of time. Anyway, the worst aspect of the matter would make it impossible to recover the material of the mobile divisions for the purposes of this provision, be it of defensive nature or offensive inspiration. We have already seen how and how much Rommel was forced to resort to movements mainly of German units - the most suitable for the specific task, but also, objectively, but also, objectively, the most *unnerving* - to plug the holes they opened suddenly here and there. Auchinleck, in fact, relied on this fact, although probably not imagining to what degree the AIT was bound to the local presence of a precarious defensive line.

Auchinleck is turned to a double attack. The essential element of the plan lay in the need that the two acts should take place not tactical simultaneously but one after the other, in terms of time and of space such that the second was launched at a time when most of the Italian-German armored forces were embroiled in difficulties caused by the first.

The second attack, from launch to be no more than 48 hours from the previous, of course would have been the main and decisive effort. Armored units on hand were the 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade equipped with *Grant* and the 23<sup>rd</sup> with 18 *Matilda* and 130 *Valentine*. The latter, indeed, although formed with infantry tanks, had been trained within the framework of an Armored Division (the 8<sup>th</sup>), but it was thought that the problem was largely offset by the presence of well prepared infantry and by a strong artillery support. Could be ready by 21 July, therefore, given the urgency, Gen. Gott was tasked to carry out the first act on 21-22 July with 13<sup>th</sup> Corps, the precise aim of breaking the Italian-German front at Deir el Abyad-El Mreir.

If success had led to the commitment of all the armored reserves of Rommel, on the 24<sup>th</sup> would be thrown into the fight the 30<sup>th</sup> Corps to seize the entire ridge of El Miteiriya and possibly proceed in depth of Tell el Aqqaqir and Deir el Abyad. Altogether the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps had three New Zealanders and two Indian brigades with 300 artillery pieces and two brigades with 274 tanks launch on a front of approximately seven kilometers.

The most absolute secrecy surrounded the plan. It was not kept any relation by Gott and each unit remained unaware of the tasks entrusted to the lateral ones. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. would provide a powerful support to the New Zealand infantry, but Gen. Fisher refused to go to danger at night. Kippenberger, who already had reasons of

irritation with British armor returned from the Divisional meeting grouchy, prophesying: "*it will be another bloody disaster!*"<sup>(93)</sup>.

According to Gott maneuver design (sketch No. 62), 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Div. had to commandeer hill 63 of Ruweisat and Deir el Shein with the 161<sup>st</sup> Brigade in first Group and the 9<sup>th</sup> in the second, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div. would have taken control of an area to the East of El Mreir with the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade in the first row and the 5<sup>th</sup> in second. Then the 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd. to advance between 161<sup>st</sup> Indian and the 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand and open a gap at the height of the El Mreir depression, through which the second line brigades could consolidate the success drawing a few kilometres further West. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. was to protect the southern flank and 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. intervene against any axis armored counterattacks after the conquest of the first objectives. Nine artillery regiments had the task of preparing and supporting the attack. The 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. - the 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. and the 69<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. -merely disruptive action farther south.

The breaking of the Italian-German line was entrusted to two brigades with no military experience and the same goes for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd., to continue the action. This, undoubtedly, was a drawback, however less than too little time allowed for the organization. To avoid the imbalances occurring during the first battle of Ruweisat, Gott inserted in his operation order a sentence clearly primarily aimed at armored unit commanders: "*all commanders be held ready to act with maximum power. Without awaiting precise orders to act according to the spirit of these policies and carry out pursuit orders until the complete destruction of the enemy forces*"<sup>(94)</sup>.

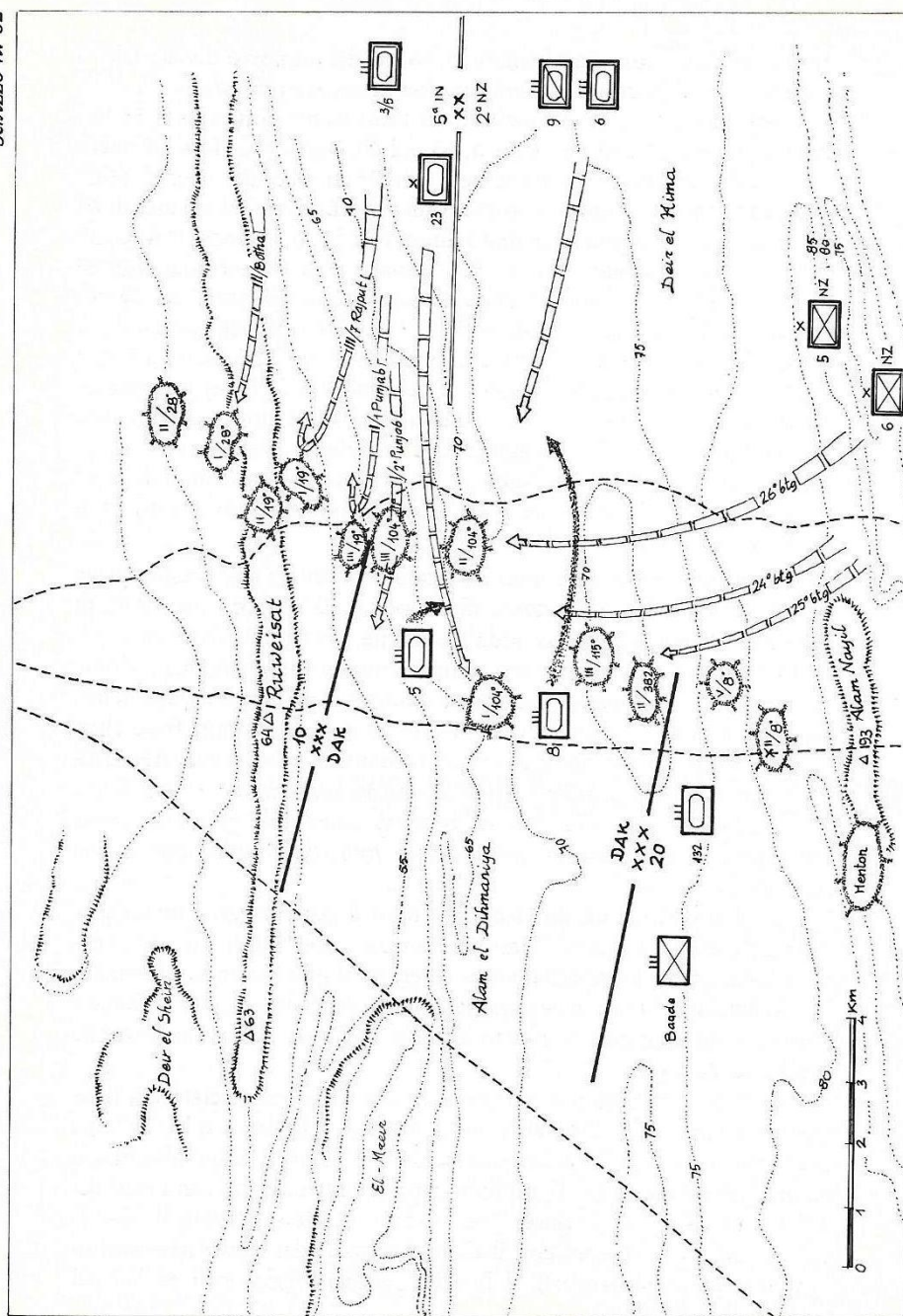
On the 18<sup>th</sup> occurred an unexpected accident: on Gen. Briggs, Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., and Gen. Lumsden, Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., were injured in a bombing and Gen. Gatehouse, commanding officer of the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. located in the area of the Delta, was called urgently to take command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., which he did on the evening of July 20.

The 21<sup>st</sup> the Italian-German deployment in the threatened area was as follows: to the North-East of Deir el Shein the *Pavia* (I and II/28<sup>th</sup> Inf. and III/26<sup>th</sup> Art.) had replaced the German 200<sup>th</sup> Inf.; at Deir el Shein had placed the units of the *Brescia* (19<sup>th</sup> Inf., a battalion formation with the remains of the 20<sup>th</sup> Inf. and III/1 Quick Art.). In the central section the German 104<sup>th</sup> Inf. 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, with the III Bn. on hill 63 of Ruweisat (old objective of the New Zealanders), the second on the southern slopes and the on

The second battle of Ruweisat (21-22 July)

IL SECONDO COMBATTIMENTO DEL RUWEISAT  
(21-22 luglio)

Schizzo n. 62



the eastern edge of El Mreir. A little further south followed the III/115<sup>th</sup> Inf. and II/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. of the 15th *Panzer*. Behind the advanced strongholds were located the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment*. In the reverse is the Baade KG, not a sector reserve, but attributed to the army.

The zero hour the 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade (Gen. Clifton) left the stage and attacked northwards, with the 24<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> battalion. The difficulties of holding over night, overcoming minefields little recognized and stop fire defense plus negatively and whether the 26<sup>th</sup> battalion managed to reach the goal, the 24<sup>th</sup> had to pass before the Germans II/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and III/115<sup>th</sup> Inf. so were badly scattered. The arrival of the 25<sup>th</sup> battalion did not allowed effective recurrence of the effort because effective stopped and put in disorder by the German II/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Furthermore, Gen. Clifton at about 03:30 warned the Division Command to believe imminent a counterattack by enemy tanks. Instead, much more appropriately, Nehring wanted the 8<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment* who awaited at first light of dawn to launch and when that happened, shortly after 05:00, the 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade was overwhelmed and even its commander taken prisoner with 500 of his men. The intervention of a battalion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade served little, which is why the unit quickly regained the starting position.

*“The worst was - commented Kippenberger - that we again counted in vain on the help of our tanks and the bitterness was extreme”*<sup>(95)</sup>. Indeed, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. had moved with two regiments, the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers and 6<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, except that one was sharply arrested by German anti-tank pieces and the other equally well blocked by minefields. The 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division closed the match for that day; altogether lost 904 men, of which 69 officers. The discontent of Gen. Inglis was such that he wrote to Freyberg, still in the hospital, *“I have clearly rejected to participate in another operation like this, until I command. I said that the sine qua non is to have the assigned to me directly under my orders”*<sup>(96)</sup>.

The action of the 161<sup>st</sup> Indian Brigade (Gen. Hughes) had less stormy events, but not all happy. On its northern flank was acting the II Bn. *Botha's Regiment*, which to occupy a small depression in the North-East of Deir el Shein. The two battalions in the first echelon had been assigned the main objectives: Deir el Shein, defended by 19<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Brescia*, was supposed to be the prerogative of the III/7<sup>th</sup> *Rajput*; hill 63 of Ruweisat, defended by III/19<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Brescia* and III/104<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, from the 1/1<sup>st</sup> *Punjab*.

The remains of the X Corps were quite shaken and Gioda intervened vigorously:

“In my recent visits to units I am noting that the spirit of officers and ranks is far down in tone. All tend to hyperbole in representing fix, all say that the tasks entrusted to us are superior to our forces and all in essence are eager to rest.

But let us be frank! We were beaten on the positions that we occupy and the enemy has stopped. But it is not impossible that even attacks. The army has no other forces to replace us. So what? I wonder (...).

To patch up the best units and go ahead with the defensive arrangement (...). Remember that any relaxation, any weakness at the moment are criminal. Will smite them inexorably”<sup>(97)</sup>.

The words of the Commander took effect and the units responded.

Under the pounding fire of the British batteries, began the enemy attack. The III *Botha* reached their indicated position without difficulty. The III/7<sup>th</sup> *Rajput* was harshly rejected by I/19<sup>th</sup> Inf. and repeated attempts did not charge anything, but left in the hands of Italy some fifty prisoners. As for the I/1<sup>st</sup> *Punjab*, the thing was more complex. Hill 63. of Ruweisat was actually a double landmark: Northwest side was the Italian III/19<sup>th</sup> Inf., East was located the German III/104<sup>th</sup> Inf.. The struggle was confused. The first assault was immediately rejected, also thanks to the barrage fire of the III/46<sup>th</sup> Artillery<sup>(98)</sup>, but the I/2<sup>nd</sup> *Punjab*, leapfrogged the former, renewed pressure focusing against Hill 63 and, exploiting the entry into effect of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm Bd. (Gen. Misa), managed to occupy the German position and capture, it seems, 190 prisoners.

The intervention of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm Bd.<sup>(99)</sup> had been preceded by a small discussion between Gatehouse, which would have preferred widening of gaps in minefields, and Gott, who gave primacy to the opportunity to exploit the moment of confusion exists in the German ranks, according to radio intercepts. He decided, however, to shift somewhat towards the direction of attack, believing, incorrectly, to initiate the Brigade in an area nearly devoid of mine. So, at 08:00, the 40<sup>th</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* made their way. English radio links immediately collapsed and Gatehouse was wounded. The first minefield met, British regiments lost the first 17 tank and the other 13. The 40<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* continued undeterred and arrived at the border at El Mreir, after a couple of hours, with 15 wagons; the 46<sup>th</sup> was disbanded: some tanks were placed with those of 40<sup>th</sup> on objective, others disappeared from circulation. When the 5<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment* was thrown on the ruins of the 23rd Arm Bd., the match ended in a blink of an eye. The Brigade lost 203 men and had destroyed 40 tanks and 47 badly damaged.

While the 23rd Arm Bd. maintaining its “charge of the 600” the Commander

of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp tried to put in the fight the 2nd Arm Bd. to go to the aid of likely pockets of resistance of the New Zealanders and the armor. The difficulties to be overcome was always the same: the minefields. Was breached quite tight, even further south of the previous attack and at 17:00 began the leakage of the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancer and then the 6<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*. It was a disaster, because the area was commanded by anti-tank guns and by the tanks of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*. After three quarters of an hour, the interim Commander of the 1st Arm. Div. threw in the towel and ordered the return of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm Bd.. Another Twenty tanks were lost.

The only armored brigade unscathed was the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Tasked with protecting the left flank of the Corps, had pushed westward, elements bumping without much conviction, against a stronghold of the *Ariete*, which nullified the move without effort.

Before moving to the area of El Alamein, it remains to mention the modest happenings of the South. From 19 July had started movements arranged by Rommel to impart a different set-up to the southern army's deployment. The XX Corps for the first time was with all its divisions employed strategy. The *Ariete* was in the area North-East of Bab el Qattara with the 8th Bersaglieri (V and XI battalion) deployed facing East and the 132<sup>nd</sup> tank (IX, X and XI battalions) in reverse, with the tanks buried as an explicit order from the AIT. The *Trieste* held the tract from Bab el Qattara to Jebel Kalakh. More to the South lay the *Littorio*, whose command had just been assumed by Gen. Becuzzi, with 12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri (XXIII and XXXVI battalion) deployed and tank 133<sup>rd</sup> (XII and LI battalions) collected to the rear. The German units were varied: the Menton KG in Bab el Qattara, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn. in El Taqa. Further back were located elements of the 90<sup>th</sup> light; the II and III/361<sup>st</sup> Inf. behind the *Trieste* and the II/155<sup>th</sup> Inf. West of El Taqa. Finally the Italian IV Cacciatori battalion just arrived, held Naqb Abu Dweis.

On the opposite side acted the 7th Armored Division, temporarily reinforced with 69<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, with the limited task of engaging the German-Italian forces. At 07:00 of 21 July had pushed a column on the eastern part of El Taqa, hunting the 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn.. Gen. Kleemann he laid out in the morning a counter-attack with the same Recon Bn., a company of Bersaglieri of the *Littorio* and was oriented to change the line of the II/155<sup>th</sup> Inf.

Now you have to move to the North. The Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Division had in the 1<sup>st</sup> Tnk Brigade and the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, as well as the South African artillery. Morshead's plan contemplated three phases.



The first translated in conquest of Tell el Alam Shaiq and Tell el Eisa by the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade reinforced, as well as the occupation of positions to the East of Tell el Makh Khad by the 24<sup>th</sup>, also strengthened. Achieved these objectives, the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian cavalry would have occupied the range between the two brigades. In the second phase the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* was to occupy hill 21 of Tell el Makh Khad, immediately supported by infantry. The third phase was thrust far into the depths by the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* to Sanyet el Miteiriya. The 20<sup>th</sup> Brigade was held in reserve to exploit the success at El Daba starting on the night of the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Undoubtedly such a little plan had to do with the design of Auchinleck discussed previously, and which was based on a second powerful attack by starting a few days after the first. It is certain that on July 21, when he knew what awaited him, Morshead was definitely annoyed. That same day wrote in his diary:

“Two hours of conference with Ramsden, during which I raised strong objections about the range of my attack scheduled for tomorrow and some changes in the times. No it is derived that the Commander-in-Chief sent me to call and a meeting took place at 30<sup>th</sup> Corp headquarters. Present the Commander in Chief, Ramsden and the Vice Chief of G.S.G. [Dorman-Smith], who took notes! The Commander in Chief has explained the plan of attack of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp. And this pleased me because of the wide dispersal of efforts and the difficulties of supporting and I pointed out that our most immediate goals were much more difficult to achieve than thought the Corps and Army. The commander in chief, according to Ramsden, was very upset and annoyed but he did not see. Emphasized that he intended to have anything to do with a willing commander. I retorted that it was my concern receive a task whose success I was reasonably certain and for which I could receive support and reinforcements and who was also my duty to minimize losses. Ultimately, the discussion ended up becoming a friendly meeting”<sup>(100)</sup>.

According to another version, instead, Auchinleck was informed by Ramsden on the afternoon of July 22, under the command of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp that Morshead would not take action on Miteiriya scheduled for the 24<sup>th</sup> and intended to report to his Government. Auchinleck was taken by a violent attack of anger and ordered to bring him immediately Morshead, but conciliatory of Ramsden changed the order in an invitation to take tea. During the meeting, then, Auchinleck “smoothed” the Australian and promised him the 69<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. This debate and the time required for the transfer of the 69<sup>th</sup> Brigade forced,

according to Dorman-Smith, moving to the 26<sup>th</sup> the attack planned for the 24<sup>th</sup>.<sup>(101)</sup>

Obviously you cannot clarify how to actually have carried out the facts. Certain it is that the dates of the diary of Morshead and the other version does not agree, that the 22<sup>nd</sup> the Australians attacked according to the scheme described above and that the 26<sup>th</sup> that will be offensive waged against El Miteiriya will have different reasons: “*having failed in the Middle-will explain Auchinleck-decided to attack North to ensure the possession of the Tell el Eisa salient*”<sup>(102)</sup>.

On 04:00 of 22 July artillery preparation began on the front between the sea and Tell el Eisa. An hour later the 26<sup>th</sup> Australian brigade advanced towards the Northwest, astride of the coastal road, against the German, 382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and at 06:30 seized the small mound of Tell el Shaiq Alam. On the orders of the AIT command, worried about a collapse, Navarini organized a counterattack with the help of army artillery fire, but there was no need because the same action 07:30 the 382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. allowed to reoccupy the lost position and driving the opponent on the basis of departure.

At 09:00 the 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade renewed impact, trying to turn from the north hill 25 of Tell el Eisa, but within an hour the effort ran aground. And with that, in practice, ran out the morning session.

The 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade, reinforced by a share of tanks, had moved at 05:30 with the 2/32<sup>nd</sup> battalion and an part of 2/43<sup>rd</sup> to Tell el Makh Khad. The fight had phases and mixed fortunes. However, at the end of the morning, the Australians did to squeeze between the German I/361<sup>st</sup> and I/155<sup>th</sup> and to assert itself on the position captured 60 men of the I/155<sup>th</sup> Inf., the resistance of the 61<sup>st</sup> Inf. units of the *Trento* and the 200<sup>th</sup> Inf. was such as to prevent the opponent from reaching the El Miteiriya Ridge. Shortly after the intervention of the Briel KG regained part of the lost ground.

Around midday, the picture Auchinleck's eyes could not be exciting but it was unbendable, though Dorman-Smith “*was clear that the offensive had failed*”<sup>(103)</sup>; While Rommel was barely under control, with the danger of a sudden crisis in the face of the persistence of the British offensive, which still had two intact armored brigades (the 22<sup>nd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup>). At 13:50 Mancinelli cabled the Comando Superiore:

“(…) Marshal Rommel believed likely imminent new attack from Alam Nayil & is seriously concerned about possible resistance after severe losses this morning. Especially is impressed by delayed reinforcements influx (even German), so the current crisis does not seem to run to the next solution.

If enemy attack were to succeed it would compromise the entire deployment, Mar. Rommel would be induced to adopt a retreat order”<sup>(104)</sup>.

In fact, in the early afternoon Rommel resolved to a serious step. In a report given to the AIT command, signaled to Navarini a decision to vacate hill 23 and 25 of Tell el Eisa and hill 21 of Tell el Makh Khad during the night.

In the opposite camp also had called Ramsden the Division to report, but with more spirit. Since the 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade was in good trim, after brief consultation with Morshead established to consider passing the second phase and plan to move to the third. So at about 20:00 the 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade and the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* moved to the El Miteiriya Ridge. The start was promising to Morshead, why a battalion of German 361<sup>st</sup> Inf. was quickly overwhelmed.<sup>(105)</sup> But soon the advance of the infantry is clearly unglued from that of the tanks and each acted on their own. The tanks arrived on the ridge alone, waited futilely for the infantry, then withdrew, while the III/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. of the *Trento* resisted doggedly to frontal assaults and infiltration of the Australian infantry, who at the end, disoriented, withdrew.

Before midnight, however, the Australians had captured a hundred men of the 90<sup>th</sup> light and five Italians of the *Trento*, against 54 fallen. The 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, meanwhile, had lost 56 tanks and twenty prisoners. The *Trento*'s losses amounted to about 50 men.

When at 19:30 the situation was described by Mancinelli “extremely critical”, again two hours later caused a comment of satisfaction: “*day that it is was certainly very hard to the AIT, therefore closes with defensive victory*”<sup>(106)</sup>. Rommel also pulled a sigh of relief: “*the night we got a definite defensive success*” noted in his diary, and in fact the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had lost 1,400 prisoners and 146 tanks.<sup>(107)</sup> Not only that, but Rommel was so pleased to make special recognition to troops and, in particular, to bring about his army's outspoken praise for the III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. of the *Trento*<sup>(108)</sup>.

However Gott had not yet given up a final attempt. At 17:00 ordered the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division to launch a night attack against Deir el Shein and hill 63 of Ruweisat. 02:00 of July 23 to the III/14th Punjab of the Indian 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade headed for hill 63, lost orientation and turned back in considerable confusion. At dawn the *Brescia* saw appear before their lines a enemy battalion without tanks and without artillery preparation; it opened a violent fire

that put him out of action the Commander, the Adjutant and three company commanders, nipped in the bud any ambitions.

The quoted message no. 3463 of 13:50 of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, with whom Mancinelli represented the intention of Rommel to “*enact retreat order*” if the success of the British offensive had affected the deployment of the army, came to the Comando Superiore as a thunderbolt. The same evening Bastico responded to the Italian G.S. liaison:

“For Marshal Rommel. Situation which appears from communications received may be stretched here but it doesn't seem serious. Resistance by the AIT & losses inflicted to enemy troops must believe that even new enemies attempts can be faced and overcome even if happen any fluctuation in line. In any case, a general withdraw would be contrary to exact orders of the Comando Supremo to resist at any cost on current line and could lead at irreparable injury great part our units especially those infantry & materials.

Remember that in addition to already come two infantry battalions and numerous tank & about seven Italian artillery groups are coming or will flow in the coming days in addition to German units, our Air Force is very efficient; reinforcements from the motherland that are very considerable in total have already begun congregating at Tobruk and Matruh.

I'm sure value & tenacity of Marshal Rommel will overcome temporary crises” <sup>(109)</sup>.

Then, following, Bastico announced, always “*for Marshal Rommel*” full concordance of the Comando Supremo of what he had written, ensuring every effort by the same Comando Supremo to accelerate the sending of reinforcements. He also added that “*Duce instructs recommend with utmost care to avoid any attrition*” <sup>(110)</sup>. The whole thing was suggested by Cavallero, remained still for a few days in Cyrenaica, which precisely the 22<sup>nd</sup> had delivered to Bastico the “General guidelines for operations to Egypt”, which gave the official form as Mussolini had written in his note of 19 July <sup>(111)</sup>.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Mancinelli reported briefly on the conversation with Rommel. Clarified, first of all, that he was firmly determined to hold the line at El Alamein at any effort, but confirmed that in the event of serious and tangible British success, the commander of the AIT would adopt measures that could go from a simple conversion of the front of an orderly withdrawal. It was not unaware that the favorable outcome of the battle of the 22<sup>nd</sup> was “*due to the one hundred percent valiant demeanor of the troops committed. A would have been enough failure by a small share of the troops to flip the situation*” <sup>(112)</sup>.

In the afternoon he returned to writing, Mancinelli anticipating the answer

Rommel's official. In essence, the AIT was extremely worn out and even if it had inflicted heavy casualties on the opponent, the difference in influx of supplies (200,000 tons reported arriving in Suez Canal against the thin Italian-German trickle) was worrisome. On balance, it could not exclude the dilemma of whether to leave or destruction in place quickly to avoid the risk.

“Don't seem to doubt the Marshal Rommel-continued Mancinelli-which in this case only the second solution is to be taken into consideration. And that a decision can be taken in a timely manner, if the unfortunate does materialize, only the same army commander.

Field marshal Rommel has strictly analogous informed his Supreme Command.

As I have already repeated multiple times, you should not see this attitude of Marshal Rommel a "tendency" to retreat. On the contrary, it is certain that he will do everything possible to maintain possession of the position reached. His command action in recent days is the best proof of this assertion.

Only in extreme cases, and to avoid a major disaster, it might be forced to order the withdraw. And it is clear that to carry out this operation with some probability of success should be at least studied previously (...)”<sup>(113)</sup>.

Rommel's letter, addressed to the person of Bastico was rather dry and Snooty but realistic:

“Contrary to the view supported by Your Excellency in the paper cited, I am of the opinion that the situation at the front of Alamein is extraordinarily critical and ten days, despite the successful defense of yesterday, will remain critical until the expected reinforcements have arrived, the troops will not be manned by more forces, the arrangement of passive defenses will not be complete and expeditious troops will not be withdrawn for the purposes of a mobile defense.

What is the real situation, you can judge only here at the front, looking at yourself. Over the last few days the enemy, which has a strong superiority in infantry and tanks, has repeatedly performed in a front manned by very slender forces [*sehr dunn*] deep raids that have been able to contain only with difficulty by far the energy contribution of troops already severely tested. Under these conditions, due to the intense, concentrated artillery fire, attacks by armored forces, the infantry and the constant bombing, German troops losses were very high.

The *forces flowed* in lately have been completely absorbed by the losses of the past six days.

You can see for sure that the English offensive now begun will be continued.

If the enemy, using his superior forces all weapons, able to

break through the poorly manned front, I will have to *decide* whether:

a) continue the fight until the last cartridge in those sectors of the Alamein positions that still resisting, but leave the enemy advancing toward the West, given that there are no other forces to arrest him;

b) or abandon the positions of Alamein, oppose further back to breakthrough with mobile forces gathered, attack the enemy that had overrun, withdraw gradually in backward positions closer to the supply bases, and then save N.A.

I think the latter is the only possible solution and please Ecc. express Your views on the merits”<sup>(114)</sup>.

Faced with this prospect, Bastico was unable to send the letter to Cavallero, returning to Rome on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, saying he agreed with Rommel, but that having the directives of the Duce *a priori* excluded any retreat from El Alamein, before giving feedback awaited the approval of the Comando Supremo.

For his part, on 24 July Rommel called De Stefanis and told him "*we must study the withdraw positions to the rear, West of Deir el Murra* [i.e. some ten kilometers west of Tell Aqqaqir!] *for the case where the enemy was able to break through the front of our troops*"<sup>(115)</sup>.

The reply, then, Cavallero was such as to leave Bastico literally speechless:

"As you know, your 13500<sup>(116)</sup>, compiled for your initiative and approved by our 157<sup>(117)</sup>, had to react against the momentary state depression that seemed to have produced in the Army Command.

Comando Supremo directives are specified in 149<sup>(118)</sup>, which was also before mentioned telegram 157. Several days have passed in the meantime & the armored army's front is gradually consolidating.

However, it is obvious that far-reaching unpredictability events, on-site Commands must take new instructions. It is also obvious that, to use the expressions telegram of Rommel, Northern Africa loss cannot be contemplated under any circumstances"<sup>(119)</sup>.

Regret appearing perhaps overly critical, but this seems the concrete application of the characteristics that a great spirit gave the order: "*If it is well drafted, must commit only the recipient*". Bastico answered the 28<sup>th</sup>, commenting on the various points of the directives referred as 149 and highlighting the serious difficulties of a logistical and personnel deficiencies and of units. From each other and it was clear what was already well known to the Comando Supremo: "*Be of extreme urgency-especially in relation to the situation of the front and bring to N.A. means I made known the need*".<sup>(120)</sup>

## 5. THE BATTLE OF EL MITEIRIYA (27 July)

The second act of the British plan left Dorman-Smith thoughtful, convinced that the opponent had had time to regroup and prepare for a new shot. He knew of Rommel's idea of alternating Italians and Germans units and, especially, On July 25 was deciphered a message of *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* from which result the AIT expected another attack<sup>(121)</sup>. Also trying to make believe to Rommel that the effort would be launched further South, it seemed there were many hopes to succeed. But Auchinleck considered the question of a wider dimension, especially as Rostov fell the 24<sup>th</sup> and the Germans were heading towards the Caucasus.

The thought of Auchinleck is sharp, with all the right evaluations, considerations, assumptions and uncertainties in a long personal letter sent on the 25<sup>th</sup> to the Chief of the Imperial General staff. Admitted that he had regained some local initiative just barely, but he blocked the persistence of the Italian-German attempts to attack El Alamein front from the Southwest. The Act essentially tactics against the Italian infantry had given good results, provided that the Germans had been forced to move in the area of Tell el Eisa and the Ruweisat because of heavy losses to Italy. Though

"I was very disappointed that our great effort of 21-22 July resolves in a nothing concrete, as long as there was hope. I don't know yet the full unfolding of the battle in the Central sector, but it seems that the 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd., although efficient, properly has lost control and the wrong direction. The infantry also appear to have committed mistakes that could be avoided".

On balance - Auchinleck continued - while inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy, the purpose, i.e. breaking the front, had not been achieved. The Australian 9<sup>th</sup> had gained some success in the North gaining greater depth, but to the action of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., which had been reinforced with the 69<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd., had been disappointing. Although convinced of the lack of overall consistency of the AIT's southern sector, by the time he had little hope of achieving something useful. Apart from that:

"The enemy now has the German infantry, with no regard for its organic constraints, intermingled with the remains of the Italian divisions on the entire front, so that we can no longer hold against the Italians and put them

in the bag like we did earlier. However, we are looking for a weakness and, I hope, soon we will find one. I believe that, due to the large extent of its line, the enemy will not be able to give much depth to his positions, except at the Center, where German tanks holding in reserve. The Italian armored divisions are on the rear of the southern sector. The question is whether or not I really have reservations with which we can strike up new attacks or to support an offensive, vigorously once waged (...)."

Then passed to consider the question of command organization. Also this track must be shown in its entirety, because it feels very instructive for the purpose and serene detachment with which he tackled a sensitive topic:

"The 8th Army - wrote Auchinleck - will again need a commander one day or another, I think, but I suggest we stay here until the end of this battle. I think I have to accomplish and I absolutely, although it is not very easy to play a dual role. However, Corbett is doing just fine in Cairo and I'm only leading political aspects, although there are few, as you can imagine.

I think that Gott is able to command the 8<sup>th</sup> Army well; so far I have got to see that he doesn't show signs of fatigue and every day studying how to handle large groups. However it has been a long time in the wilderness and may [so] go to the 9<sup>th</sup> Army in Syria, if he is deemed ripe for the command of an army. He impressed me very favorably in all circumstances.

I think when Wilson has finished his investigation may go away, no matter how admirable in dealing with the problems in Syria and have no apparent symptoms of fatigue. Therefore, we would like a commander for the 8<sup>th</sup> Army from the Mainland or from India. Must be energetic, a man of strong personality and have a more versatile and receptive mind. Must also be young, in every sense, in spirit and in body, and prepared to accept advice and learning, unless it already has previous experience of Western Desert (...).

I decided to replace Whiteley as head of the G.S. of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army with de Guingand. He has absolutely no need of a change and I hope that you can find a niche in the field of operational planning, a sector which is particularly suitable. I don't think he's cut for a high post of G.S. in a large complex units, though first-rate element for such assignments in top-level Commands. In my opinion, deserves the promotion to major-general and I hope they put forward for such advancement. For sure it is worthy, as evidenced by his service over the past two years.

Ramsden is doing well in command of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp and he, Gott and I work very well together and in harmony. I have Dorman-Smith that helps me here and I find it of great value. Messervy was taking his place as sub-Chief of the G.S.G. [commander in Chief], but now is far, in India, to prepare and train an Armored Division (...)."



On operating problem would made sure that Auchinleck made an extreme effort to stave off the heavy threat loomed on Egypt, but became concerned not to create false illusions of a quick decision: " I think last month we were close – he added - *but the scale is absolutely poised and on 1 July I myself wouldn't have bet they could withstand the current positions for more than a few days.*" Now the training of the army had improved significantly and the hypothesis, theoretically possible, having to undergo a new retreat seemed unlikely: the defensive system put in place was based on a strong position of organized resistance in depth for over thirty miles , consisting of a checkerboard of cornerstones and deployments of artillery, so as to be able to intervene in any area of a raid. In particular, the cornerstones were required from a minimum of infantry with some battery, while the bulk of the artillery, defended by shares of mobile infantry, remained free for a massive movement of the fire when necessary. In addition, on the back of the defensive position of El Alamein there the preparations to the *wadi* Natrun and the Delta. "*Whatever happens-repeats-I want to hold the 8<sup>th</sup> Army or the majority of it as a mobile field force*".

Finally, Auchinleck was strategic aspects which knew in serious discussion in London. On July 18 Roosevelt had sent to Britain Hopkins, Gen. Marshall and the Adm. King, as his personal representatives, to discuss and arrange with Churchill and the chiefs of British definitive plans above sea level for the second half of 1942 and 1943 for the provisional ones. It goes without saying that the operation Sledgehammer (opening of the second front in Europe) was the principle subject, but the Middle East was in second place.

The Middle East-was a paragraph of instructions written by Roosevelt for his envoys -had to be kept in the firmest possible way, whether Russia has surrendered or resists. The collapse of the African front would mean, in succession of phases, the loss of Egypt and the Suez Canal, the loss of Syria, the loss of oil wells in Mosul, the loss of the Persian Gulf and its oil area, the junction of German and Japanese forces and perhaps the loss of the Indian Ocean, the probable German occupation of French North Africa and sustained interruption of the merchant route to stop in West Africa the grave danger to the entire Atlantic navigation and even the East coast of Brazil, the German use of Spain and of Portugal and its colonies. That said, it was decided the most appropriate means for the defense of the Middle East, namely sending air reinforcements

and land and/or a new operation in Morocco or Algeria to take Rommel's Army from behind  
(122).

Churchill had very clear ideas: absolutely no intention to engage in Europe in 1942; absolute willingness to solve the Middle East issue. After many spirited talks: *Sledgehammer* was shelved and the *Gymnast* (landing in French North Africa) took its place. Since the latter variants could generate confusion, Churchill renamed the project with the name *Torch*, extending it to cover landings in Algeria.

All this Auchinleck of course was not at current, nor knew that Brooke had managed barely stop a telegram to Churchill that incited a new offensive, but wanted to say:

“About this request for a "second front", we believe that you have already created a "second front" of not inconsiderable importance here! If it becomes necessary to establish a "second front" in Europe, North Africa and the Mediterranean basin as a whole are, in my judgment, truly Europe strategically and inseparable. Wouldn't it be a good thing to try to do this publicly understood? (...)” (123).

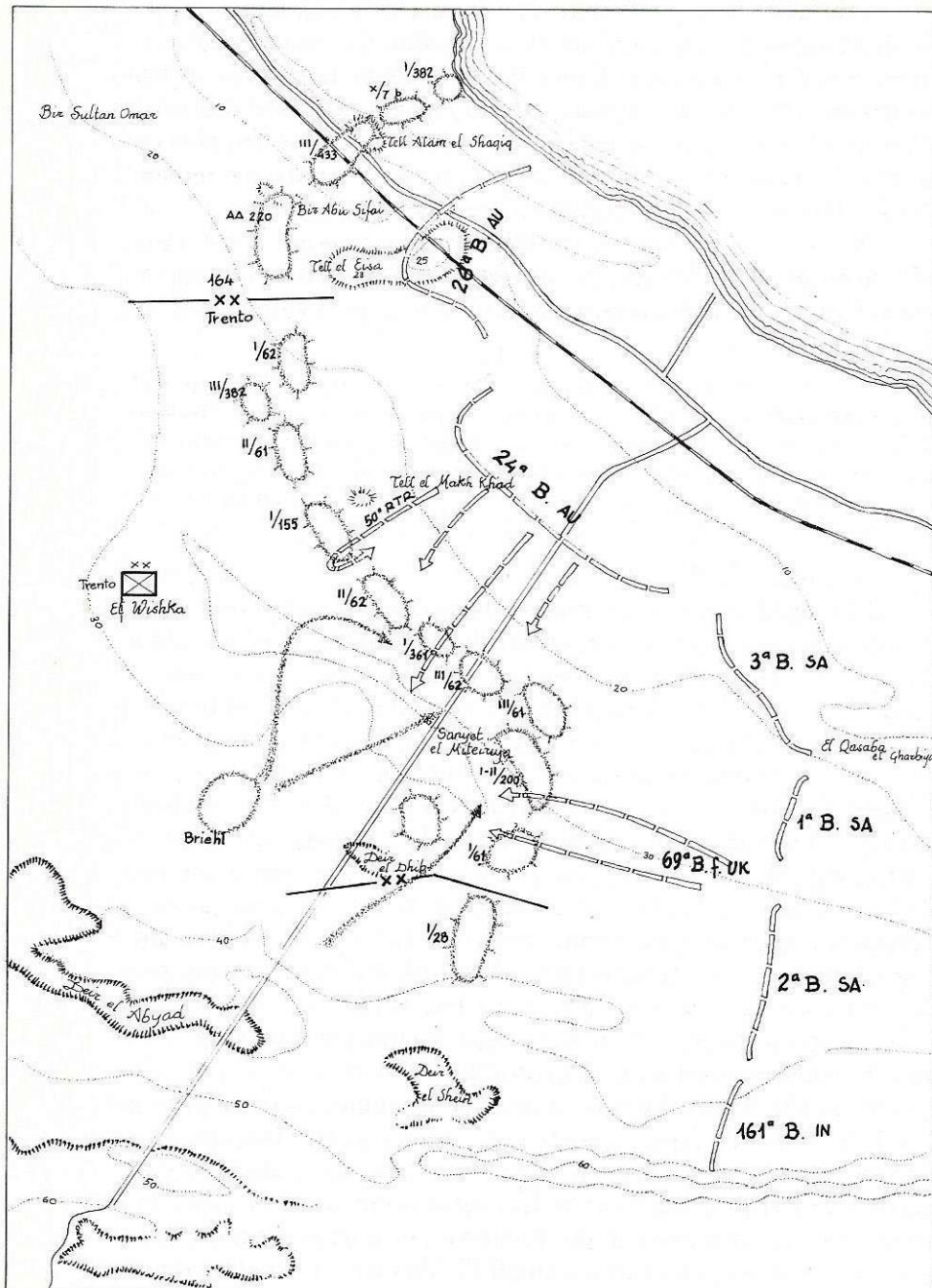
On July 25, according to the British information service, Italian troops had left the area of Tell el Eisa and, more precisely, the *Trieste* was believed to the West and southwest of the relief (while there was the German 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div.) and *Trento* West of El Miteiriya (124). In total you calculated present 9,100 men, 70 pieces of artillery by field and heavy field and 45 anti-tank, 15 armored cars and a dozen wagons. On the right, German troops identified were two battalions of the 382<sup>nd</sup> Inf., the Kiehl KG, the 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon. Bn., two battalions of the 361<sup>st</sup> Inf., the Briel KG and 200<sup>th</sup> Inf., for a total of 3,600 men, 106-120 Guns and from 26 to 29 88 guns. Basically, apart from the *Trieste* now in the southern sector, with a small amount the while including intermingling of axis units probably had not been seen in its entirety (sketch No. 63).

The plan was that the 24<sup>th</sup> Australian Brigade, supported by 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, from the Northeast's takeover the ridge of El Miteiriya, while the British 69<sup>th</sup> Brigade would reach from the East the road for Naqb Abu Dweis, a few kilometers south of this Ridge. Through the breach were to break, to exploit success, 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. and the 4th light Arm. Bd., that during the night would have left their South of Ruweisat locations to move collection area southeast of the entrenched camp of El Alamein. Auchinleck sent out

## The Battle of El Miteiriya (27 July)

## IL COMBATTIMENTO DI EL-MITEIRIYA (27 luglio) ' .

*Schizzo n. 63*



a special agenda of encouragement to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. It ended with a vigorous "*Stick to it*" (= not let go).

At midnight on July 26 the 24<sup>th</sup> Australian Brigade began to move to the track to Naqb Abu Dweis. After about an hour it fell under the intense heat of the arrest of the three battalions that dammed the attack: the II/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. of the *Trento*, the German I/361<sup>st</sup> Inf. and III/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. The fight fired hard and after a fierce resistance lasted more than an hour the I/361<sup>st</sup> Inf. was overwhelmed also losing 115 prisoners. The gate opened and Australians are extended, although hampered by the fire of two battalions of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Infantry. At 02:00 the enemy occupied Sanyet el Miteiriya; However the Briel KG's intervention could eliminate penetration and fix the flaw.

In the East there was set in motion the British 69<sup>th</sup> Brigade, focusing on the extreme right of the *Trento* and precisely on the stretch held by the German I and II/200<sup>th</sup> Inf. and the I/61<sup>st</sup> Inf., involving also the I/28<sup>th</sup> Inf., far left of X Corps. Here the progression was much slower, as long as the incomplete clearance immediately poses great difficulty the 6th *Durham Light Infantry*, head Brigade of the battalion.

As much as 69<sup>th</sup> make now in considerable disarray, the pressure was strong: the I/200<sup>th</sup> Inf. and a company of the I/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. were overwhelmed, while the IV/46<sup>th</sup> Artillery of the *Trento*, striking on the British points, began to shoot at zero. Even in this area the Mobile reserves managed to restore the situation at 06:30.

At 07:00 the Australian and English however renewed the attempt against strongpoints held by the II/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf., III/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. Was useless if as long as thwarted by the heavy weapons of the infantry, artillery and minefields. Probably in a different tactical context things would have been different, but luckily our Gen. R. Briggs, Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., that was supposed to follow the 69<sup>th</sup> Brigade, did not dared to venture blindly into mined areas are not recognized, or rather squeezed into passages deemed not sufficiently accessible. So the British infantry, left alone and blinded by a sandstorm, was bloody rejected.

A little later, around 10:00, it fell to the Australians to give up, although the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* tried to intervene to help them. It was stopped by the I/115<sup>th</sup> Inf. and 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn. and lost 22 tanks, immediately before the eyes of the stunned 2/28<sup>th</sup> Australian battalion.

Morshead then pulled the sums on the basis of the information that flowed irregularly due to disturbances in radio broadcasts. The

two infantry brigades had exhausted their offensive capacity; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade was laid-out in view of its passage through the Australian file, but went on to say that he “*would not move until the infantry had guaranteed the clearing the mines*”<sup>(125)</sup>; the 50<sup>th</sup> Royal Tanks had had enough. The 24<sup>th</sup> Australian losses amounted to about 400 men, those of the British 69<sup>th</sup> to 600; the tanks put out of action bypassed the thirties. At this point, with the consent of Ramsden, Auchinleck decided to put an end to the operation. It had been a complete failure again. There was now a pause for reflection,.

In the southern sector of the front of the relative calm was broken only by a few sporadic activities of mechanized patrols and brief artillery duels, which invited the feverish work of arrangement and laying defensive minefields of the AIT.

By the end of July ended the first battle of El Alamein and was able to finally begin a period of global restructuring without the worry of British attacks. After the war Bayerlein told his British interviewer:

"We remained deeply impressed and badly upset by the manner in which we attacked during the entire month of July. Little break thought not missed our lines, and more than once, between 10 and 16 July. If you had been able to insist in attacking for a couple more days, you would have certainly succeeded.

The July 26 was the decisive day. We were left without ammunition for heavy artillery and Rommel decided to withdraw to the border line if your attack was renewed”<sup>(126)</sup>.

The 26<sup>th</sup> had arrived at the front Gen. Warlimont of the OKW. Wore no specific orders, but limited himself to emphasize the importance of staying on the positions of El Alamein, depending of the imminent invasion of Persia, through the Caucasus, from part of von Kleist's army. However, the day after Rommel asked an interview with Barbasetti. Not being able to move for a stomach ailment, the 29<sup>th</sup> arrived at El Daba Bastico and Rommel accompanied him during the unit inspections.

"Down the track, from cornerstone to cornerstone-remembered later top-commander Rommel was illustrating the evolution of the line with a perfect knowledge of the terrain and of the men who occupied it. I was convinced to find disheartened or irritated: I was wrong, it was serene and occasionally the overlooked to mind the idea of those distant goals that I had spoken with enthusiasm, shortly after the capture of Tobruk. The arrival of the reinforcements had turned”<sup>(127)</sup>.

According the long letter he sent Cavallero to return to the *Comando Superiore*, the AIT deployment was relatively weak in the North for a variety of reasons, such as the evolution of the line, the modest tactical grips offered by land, the ease of movement for armored units, the mediocre possibility of remote viewing. At the Center was robust enough, especially at locations of Qaret el Abd and Bab el Qattara, where the enemy had conducted considerable work. To the South was very strong, due to both natural features that allowed a defense with limited forces, both to the work carried out at the time by the British at Naqb Abu Dweis and El Taqa. In these places the defensive arrangement created and reserve stations and included large shelters about 40 and more local, with high ceilings, wide corridors and rooms.

The entire line was determined by a series of strongpoints prepared according to the criteria laid out by Rommel since mid-July <sup>(128)</sup>, but, regardless of the interval, their garrison was too limited and work away from completion. It was a large possibility of infiltrations by the enemy with the ruinous effects. Rommel's intention was to set up in front of the entire front of a broad mined band and, later, an additional mined strip on the reverse of the strongpoints of the first order; but as he had not ruled on the time it takes to similar realization, it was a job request for several weeks.

The concerns expressed in that regard by Bastico, Rommel naturally had retorted that the speed of implementation depended on the ability to have at every step the work materials. Whereupon, equally naturally, Bastico had always be replicated by transport, whose unhappy situation was known to all.

In his report, Bastico was, then, to speak of Italian units. The Corps commanders had repeated painful note already repeatedly delivered to the *Comando Supremo*: the need for trained and perfectly complements solidly framed; the convenience of a rotation in the General staff officers, given that quite a few of these had absolutely need a replacement; the exhaustion of the troops who feel, as expected, more every day, the urgent need for vehicles that was growing “*with geometric progression*” because motives for war losses, wear for the impressive state of the slopes, and for lack of spare parts.

The transportation issue was at the Centre of concerns

of the commanders, especially if they thought the idea of a withdrawal to take place under the pressure of the enemy: in that case you would have gone to meet “*exceptional heavy losses*”.

As the spirit of the soldiers, all in all you could define high despite the inconvenience, but “*still higher than it would be if all officers who are their direct contact-subordinates and captains-were at the height of their task.*” Even among the commanders of large units acquired significant wear, and were in place several substitutions. In XX Corps Gen. Adolfo Infante was replaced Gen. Arena at the *Ariete* Arm. Div., Gen. Carlo Ceriana Mayneri to Gen. Becuzzi at the *Littorio* Arm. Div. and Gen. Francesco La Ferla was to take over the *Trieste* Mot. Div. of Gen. Azzi. The X Corps were movements underway: Gen. Dino Parri in place of Gen. Lombardi, already back in Italy seriously injured, of the *Brescia* Inf. Div.; While they were going to get substitutes of Gen. Gioda, Commander of the Corps, and Gen. Torriano, Commander of the *Pavia*.

In terms of operational forecasts:

“Field marshal Rommel-writing-speaking of the Bastico situation be pointed out that, as is known, the British will surely have substantial reinforcements between late August and early September, earning so for this time a decisive superiority-in infantry, artillery, armored vehicles and also aviation-about our forces: so our new offensive should be begun before such superiority was achieved by them; but as in any case, the fight is hard, it is imperative that the substantial reinforcements arrive before the 20<sup>th</sup>.

He essentially considers the present situation and the future with optimism tempered with sense of manifest reality: but does not hide the difficulties it will deal with the conditions and overcome them with his usual energy”<sup>(129)</sup>.

Simultaneously with this letter, Bastico sent another to the Corps Commands, of another tone. As stated the issue was distressing, but vehicles move across borders, particularly in strategic circumstances in favor, had been accomplished in piecemeal and unsystematic only partly due to deficiencies in the field of transport. According to the top commander, even from a hasty examination showed considerable neglect in logistics:

“Auto transport-units claimed-has carried out without taking into account the constraints and the good organic framework (...). Generally you have left behind everything constituted an impediment or a *concern or even simply a fix to solve*, and to resolve the

fix has relied on the help of the Comando Superiore before you have exhausted its possibilities (...)"

Are not able to assess the accuracy of the remarked, but the responsibilities of the units seem a bit too noticeable, clearly remembering how the divisions, regiments, battalions were screened in Egypt shortly after the capture of Tobruk. However, the continuation of the circular was definitely founded:

"The so-called bases have grown out of proportion to all units and minor units; Corps, divisions, regiments and units below Regiment have created one or more rearward bases and advanced bases scattered from to Tmimi and Daba and each have sometimes left, in disarray, entire units, isolated men in substantial quantities, means and materials of every kind."

And the follow-up was particularly hard:

"So sometimes I had the need to strictly recall the staffs of large units to a more careful organization and a more effective functioning of the services: but if I have to draw inferences from repeated S.O.S. which are still directed to the Comando Superiore in matters of narrow competence of the staffs of large units themselves, I have to recognize that they are still unequal to their task" <sup>(130)</sup>.

It must be said that the intervention of Bastico, especially after the visit to the Corps, called good fruit and the most glaring shortcomings were eliminated (also thanks to the operational period of calm).

Well as the Chief of staff of the R, Navy, Riccardi had traveled to North Africa to realize for themselves the conditions of seaports. At the end of the inspection a report compiled for the Comando Supremo, flashed to the de facto status.

In his opinion, Benghazi remained the port on which direct the ships of greater tonnage, then direct them one at a time at Tobruk. Here could be sent the smaller steamers, while for Marsa Matruh and eventually to Derna, Bardia and Sollum were used only landing craft and motorized sailing vessels <sup>(131)</sup>.

With the development of anti-aircraft and anti-ship defenses, the completion port works and the allocation of landing craft, the mass would be gradually shifted to Tobruk and Marsa Matruh posted some modest tonnage steamer. Of course, in Tripoli it did not have to that traffic needed to Tripolitania.

Calculated 100,000 tons the volume of supplies monthly



and adding 20,000 tones of materials to be unloaded by the major ships and load on coastal traffic, the allocation of port movement was to be as follows:

|                                |              |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Tripoli                        | 20,000 tons. |
| Benghazi                       | 45,000 tons. |
| Tobruk                         | 30,000 tons. |
| Marsa Matruh                   | 12,000 tons. |
| Derna, Ras Ilal, Salum, Bardia | 13,000 tons. |

The 60 landing craft expected would essentially insured beyond Tobruk trafficking and, awaiting the arrival of the most appropriate means, relieving working port of Benghazi and Tobruk to the extent of three or four units for each. According to a calculation of maximum wide, wanting to ensure the daily arrival of four landing craft in Marsa Matruh, it was necessary for this task, because 32 rafts the cycle trip including the essential maintenance was not normally considered lower than eight days (four for transfer, loading and unloading, and four reserves for maintenance and the inevitable stops due to bad weather). As a result, if not from Benghazi the coastal traffic would remain that some 20 landing craft: very little.

A considerable improvement you could get just putting full efficiency the railroad built by the British in Marmarica and extending up to Tobruk. Then the traffic to the East of Tobruk was secured by the railway and the landing craft, from which aid would become the primary means for coastal traffic from Benghazi.

In that regard it was necessary, however, to bear in mind the experience already made by the Germans: the most formidable enemy of the MAS and the landing craft was the plane, and since it seemed not realistic to count on the protection of fighters, it was necessary to strengthen the anti-aircraft defense of the vessels in question.

Riccardi made a detailed analysis of the ports and first of Tobruk, the harbor, which at that time required the maximum effort. Despite the constant night aerial pounding over the past fortnight, the daily average discharge was about 1,250 tons and the load 160 tons; However, the rest of the ships in the roadstead was alarming and unacceptable (it was even *more than a month*, as is the case with the German steamer *Menes*). Then he laid down provisions designed to avoid to Tobruk by more than five

steamers, one of which is large, and to make possible unloading in no more than five to six days.

Apart from that he was referring to the unloading of materials, matter for the R. Navy, it was necessary to provide absolutely to a sharp increase of terrestrial offload means to prevent the already worrisome accumulation on the docks. In other words, it took at least 75 vehicles per day compared with the current 40. A railway extension effected until the port (predictable yet about *two months*), the need for trucks would be diminished.

In effect the Egyptian headed railway at Matruh and brought by the British to Sidi Rezegh (30 km from Tobruk) allowed a real advantage. The first train, pulled by a repaired war booty locomotive, was activated on 24 July. On 31 July the availability of Italian locomotives reached 20 and allowed a daily traffic of about 300 tons between Sidi Rezegh and El Daba. In the rear areas, unfortunately, had not been able to conclude anything: the trunks Zuara – Tripoli - Tajura, and Benghazi - Barce, were irrelevant, both for brevity and for potential path and the idea of extending the Tripoli - Tajura at least up to Sirte and Benghazi - Barce until Tobruk remained a dream, despite even the Germans are interested in the matter. It is clear that a lack of materials disastrously serious about solving the problem, but you can not avoid the question of the absence of a clear willingness realized supported by an energetic organizational capacity. This notwithstanding, it is clear, from the deficient strategic vision in the Libyan theater of operations not only during the 1930s, but even during the "non-belligerency"!

NOTES TO CHAPTER 7.

- 1 Since the destruction of the documents took place Wednesday, July 1, the day acquired by British troops the ironic title of "Ash Wednesday."
- 2 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 621-623.
- 3 A. BRYANT, op. cited above, p. 393.
- 4 Ibid, p. 394.
- 5 It is keen interest in reading the pages of Churchill on the motion of no confidence. Among other things, during the discussion, one Member came up with a proposal: "we have in this country five or six generals, citizens of other countries, Czechs, Poles and Frenchmen, all trained to the use of these weapons and of this German technique. I am well aware that this impacts our pride, but wouldn't it be possible to temporarily entrust someone to these men in command of combat units, at least until we have experienced us men? (...) They know how to fight this war, our men did not know this and I say it's much better to win battles and save the lives of British soldiers under the command of other members of the United Nations rather than lose them under the command of our incapable officers (...)" Then, in support of the assertion that the British Army was dominated by prejudices of class, cited the sarcastic comment circulating in England: If Rommel had been in the British Army, would be a Sergeant! (W. CHURCHILL, op. cited, p. IV, vol. I, pp. 449-467).
- 6 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. IV, vol. I, pp. 453-455.
- 7 F. H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, p. 391.
- 8:O. KIPPENBERGER, op. cited above, p. 139. As for Pienaar, which it was the level of his command action, it appears that his feelings towards the British could no longer be called idyllic. The night on July two British journalists reached the command of the 1st South Africa and found Pienaar on the phone. "*General, obviously, speaks with a bomber aviation Command and his growing irritation with the tone of voice. Still this afternoon-yelling-your damned bombers, for whole hours you are avid against my II battalion of the Royal Durban Light Infantry, which suffered losses are not indispensable, although he did every possible report. A real shame. Know now, dear Sir, that forty-four years ago my father fought furiously in the Transvaal against you damned English, and the feelings of my family since then, are not changed. I can therefore understand perfectly, in the same spirit, the program of the Royal Air Force, including annihilation the South African forces!*" "*Only-ends very excited, as the inflated veins of the neck from the apoplectic wrestler eerily-I wish here, have precise ideas immediately. I want to know which side they are, I want to know if Rommel is my friend or my enemy, if I have to shoot me or if I have to put my anti-aircraft artillery into action when your aircraft, what I'd do with indescribable enthusiasm. Prayer, Lord, to respond in writing. Good night!*" (p. Caccia Dominioni, *Alamein* 1933-1962, Longanesi, Milano 1954, p. 53).
- 9 M. CARVER, *The battle of El Alamein*, Baldini e Castoldi, Milan 1964, p. 34.
- 10 La 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. It remained with the 4th and 22nd Arm. Bd. The 7th Mot. Bd. depended directly from 13<sup>th</sup> Corp. by Command to 5 July, then will pass to the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div.
- 11 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 628. It should be noted that according to the British information service, Rommel had 100-150 German tanks and 40-50 Italians on June 27; of 120 German and Italian 100 tanks on June 30. Incidentally, the news on the number of Italian tanks were uncertain but, given the quality of the armored vehicle, it was of little importance in English eyes.
- 12 F. H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, p. 393.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 393.
- 14 F. von MELLENTIN, op. cited above, p. 205.
- 15 E. ROMMEL, op. cited or, p. 205.
- 16 The XX Corps were nearly as organic although force levels and much reduced resources. The *Ariete* had: 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri with V and XII motorized battalion and III Bn. A/T; 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank with VIII, IX and X Tank battalions Medium tanks and a co. A/A from 20; 132<sup>nd</sup> artillery (two groups of 75/27, a group of 105/28, two groups of 90/53 self-propelled, two groups from 75/18); group them *Nizza Cavalleria* squadrons; 32<sup>nd</sup> Bn. mix genius, service units.

- The *Trieste* was: 65<sup>th</sup> infantry two battalions, 66<sup>th</sup> infantry two battalions, 21<sup>st</sup> artillery (two groups from 100/17, two groups of 75/27, a group from 75/50, two batteries from 20), 52<sup>nd</sup> Bn. mix genius, service units.
- 17 Historical Journal X Corps, phonogram sent to the Army at 12:15 and received at 17:05. X Corps had placed the *Brescia* with II/19<sup>th</sup> Infantry and 1<sup>st</sup> quick artillery (two groups of 100/17 and one of 75/27); the *Pavia* with the II/27<sup>th</sup> infantry and 26<sup>th</sup> artillery (two groups of 100/17 and one of 75/27); the 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri with two battalions and the XLIX/16<sup>o</sup> artillery of 105/28.
- 18 Historical Journal XXI Corps, phonogram sent to the Army at 14:10. XXI Corps had in place the *Trento* with the II/62<sup>nd</sup> infantry and 24<sup>th</sup> artillery (a group of 100/17 and one of 75/27); the 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri with two battalions; the 2<sup>nd</sup> quick artillery; the III/24<sup>th</sup> artillery of 105/28 and XXXII Sappers battalion.
- 19 DSCSAS, tele 3426 dated 1.7.1942, hours 20.30, Col. Mancinelli.
- 20 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 191.
- 21 F. von MELLENTIN, op. cited above, p. 161.
- 22 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 191-192.
- 23 F. von MELLENTIN, op. cited above, p. 161.
- 24 Historical Journal of XX Corps, tele 2/0835 date 2.7.1942, 08:35 hours.
- 25 G. CIANO, op. cited above, p. 633.
- 26 Gen.. Magli, to the Comando Supremo, on 30 June had sent a personal letter to Cavallero, touching the subject in these terms: "(...) *Following what I thought of having to talk about promotion to Marshal- for Etc. Bastico - I should add that yesterday morning in accompany him to Guidonia, I asked permission to send to the Duce the rank insignia provided that he could deliver them personally to you Excellency and Etc. Bastico: I had permission. So with the result tha' tomorrow I will them to Comm. De Cesare, with the prayer of deliverance to the Duce (...)*" (Diary Cavallero, 1.7.1942 date).
- On the morning of 1 July, Mussolini had sent this telegram to the King: "*I think it is necessary for obvious reasons the promotion of General Ugo Cavallero to marshal of Italy. The decree will be submitted for signature as soon as possible of Your Majesty. I am sure that this measure will have the approval of Your Majesty. It is my conviction that the promotion is widely deserved.* Mussolini "(Diario Cavallero, date 1.7.1942, this same day, tele. 31329 hour 10:20). Apart from the use of the indicative subjunctive place in final phrase, it is clear the formal misconduct of Mussolini in regards of the King.
- 27 G. CIANO, op. cited above, p. 635. "*General Cavallero-wrote in his diary the then Inspector of the cavalry-was promoted Marshal! This aroused a not too favorable impression*" (CHARLES CERIANA MAYNERI, *Speaks a troop commander*, Rahim, Naples 1947, p. 98).
- 28 Historical Journal XX Corps.
- 29 Historical Journal of the Division under date of July 2 record: "*in the evening by Corp. Command is transmitted an order, via Ariete Division, (...) to focus on the goal of Alam Nayil. The order, delivered to an officer of the Division, they arrived in time to command.* "
- 30 Historical Journal of XX Corps. The 4th Armored Brigade had that day in line 18 *Grant*, 33 *Stuart* and 12 *Valentine*; but you ignore which units was sent against the *Ariete*.
- 31 *Ariete* pointed to the loss of 16 - 47/32 pieces, 6 of 75/27, 6 of 88, 1 of 90 and 7 of 105. According to British sources, the attacker would have captured 350 prisoners and 44 guns (16 of 75, 11 of 88, 12 of 105 and 5 of British 25 pounds).
- 32 The *Ariete* was able to reconstitute on a tank platoon and a section of 90, made available to the 15th *Panzer*; the V Bersaglieri battalion with a command platoon and an organic company. Sent to B echelon 5 officers and 70 Bersaglieri of the V battalion, and 6 officers and 129 Bersaglieri of the XII besides providing arms to units.
- 33 F. von MELLENTIN, op. cited above, p. 162.

- 34 J.A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 314.
- 35 The variant was derived from a similar proposal from Mancinelli, who suggested the term *Italian-German Tank Army* (ACIT) and the explicit formulation by the Comando Supremo.
- 36 Historical Journal XX Corps, date 3.7.1942.
- 37 L. A.I. AGAR-HAMILTON and L.C.F TURNER, op. cited above, p. 296.
- 38 DSCSAS, tele 3288 date 4.7.1942, hours 23:50 Col. Mancinelli.
- 39 W. CHURCHILL, op. mentioned P. IV, vol. I, pp. 463-464.
- 40 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 653.
- 41 A. BRYANT, op. cited above, p. 395.
- 42 DSCSAS, tele 34348 /0p. date 4.7.1942, at 10:50, Cavallero's.
- 43 F. H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, p. 396.
- 44 Almost simultaneously the war diary of the DAK commented: "*As might be expected the enemy realized retrograde movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer and immediately began to exert strong pressure.*"
- 45 Historical Journal of XX Corps, phonogram s.n. 3.7.1942 date, at 13:45, of the AIT.
- 46 I.S.O PLA YFAIR, op. cited above, p. 343.
- 47 DSCSAS, 3291 date 5.7.1942 tele of Col. Mancinelli.
- 48 DSCSAS, date 5.7.1942. Who, instead, displayed quite different mood-you ignore if real conviction or to a misunderstanding the sense of «respect», if not even flattery against Mussolini, as had already happened during the campaign in Greece-was Cavallero.
- The July 7 Ciano wrote in his diary: "*Cavallero, in short visit to Libya, is one hundred percent optimistic on the upcoming resumption of operations. And sure the superiority of Axis forces will lead us soon to Alexandria and in a short time to Cairo and on to the canal (...)*" (G. CIANO, op. cited, p. 636).
- 49 Entries into the field of the 24th Australian Brigade has a result. On 2 July Auchinleck ordered that a column be used immediately on the Australian face of El Alamein. The day after Gen. Morshead, who had in mind the operating constraints set by the Canberra Government flew from Auchinleck and asked him to revoke the order as long as the Division, as such, was not yet ready. The interview, as recalled by Morshead, unfolded this way:  
Auchinleck: I want that Brigade now.  
Morshead: you can't have it.  
A.: What?  
M: It must fight framed in its Division.  
A.: even if I give you my order?  
M: give me the order and you will see.  
Auchinleck then promised that the entire Division would have been used organically as soon as ready and Morshead, however, allow that the 24th Brigade (not his column) passed temporarily under the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp (BARTON MAUGHAN, Tobruk and El Alamein, Canberra, 1966, p. 552).
- 50 the 4th Armored Brigade had become "light" because consisted of three regiments armored cars.
- 51 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 195.
- 52 *ibid.* p. 156.
- 53 DSCSAS, tele 3344 date 9.7.1942, 12:25 hrs, Col. Mancinelli.
- In that afternoon, Rommel was dedicated with special care to examine the situation in the Central sector of the front and to inspect local units. But wanted to find time for a visit with very human meaning. At 16:30 had fallen, seriously injured, the major. Leopoldo Pardi, Commander of II/1<sup>st</sup> quick artillery. In mid-June of 1941 he was particularly distinguished in the defense of Halfaya Pass as Commander of I/2<sup>nd</sup> quick. His name was one of the few known within the *Afrikkakorps*. When Rommello heard, flew with his *Stork* to the hospital of El Daba, where Leopoldo had been brought in very serious condition, and ordered him immediately with his plane to a hospital ship at Marsa Matruh. But Pardi was dying and no more transportable. Rommel squeezed his hand for a long time in silence, before returning to the front.

- 54 DSCSAS, tele 3352 date 9.7.1942, 21:50 hrs, Col. Mancinelli.
- 55 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, pp. 196-197.
- 56 As the use of the units together constitute a fundamental principle, in practice there were adaptations. So, to avoid the total destruction of a unit, Morshead ruled that in reserve, on the defensive positions of Alexandria, were left nucleus around which to reconstitute units that had suffered heavy losses. Therefore, the reserve was initially made up of a battalion for each brigade, with each battalion brigade posted to the front leaving behind the deputy, six officers and sixty men to certain degree and specialization.
- 57 NEIL ORPEN, *South African Forces in World War II*, Purnell, Cape Town-Johannesburg, 1971, p. 365. Strangely the goal wasn't fixed in Tell el Makh -Khad.
- 58 B. MAUGHAN, op. cited above, p. 563.
- 59 N. ORPEN, op. cited above, p. 368.
- 60 DSCSAS, tele 3365, dated 11. 7.1942, at 21:30, Col. Mancinelli. The 99<sup>th</sup> battery of the XXXIII Group 149/40 remained with approximately 400 shots *at maximum charge*. Given the impending enemy, the battery Commander ordered to open fire at point-blank. If before the heavy, long 149 mouths to horizontal fire, it opened a hell that engulfed the land, Australians and vans, the pieces rate of fire was enough to create a tremendous atmosphere. When, after the last shot, in front of the battery existed only death, they were coming back the first units of the German 382<sup>nd</sup> Inf...
- 61 DSCSAS, tele 01/12885, date 12.7.1942, at 12:45.
- 62 DSCSAS, tele 3374, data 12.7.1942, at 19:00, Col. Mancinelli.
- 63 DCSAS, tele 01/12989, op. date 13.7.1942, at 23:10.
- 64 DSCSAS, tele 3393, date 14.7.1942, at 18:15, Col. Mancinelli.
- 65 Precisely s.n. date 16.7.1942 of CSF AAS-Vff. military information.
- 66 F. H. HINSLEY, op. cited above.
67. I.S.O PLA YFAIR, op. cited above, p. 347.
- 68 The 2nd Armored Brigade consisted of: 6<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, 3<sup>rd</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, 9<sup>th</sup> *Lancers*. Had 46 *Grant*, 11 *Stuart* and 59 *Crusader*.
- 69 The 22<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade consisted of 3<sup>rd</sup> C. L. Y. and *Royal Scots Greys*. He had 31 *Grant*, 21 *Stuart* and 23 *Crusader*.
- 70 Official British report says: "*The choice was between extermination and surrender and about 350 men were captured*" (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited, p. 349). Yes, even the Italian infantry often found themselves powerless in the face of British tanks.
71. I.S.O PLA YFAIR, op. cited above, p. 350.
- 72 DSCSAS, tele 3402, date 15.7.1942, hours 14:30, Col. Mancinelli.
- 73 DSCSAS, tele 3408, date 15.7.1942, at 23:40, Col. Mancinelli.
- 74 H. KIPPENBERGER, op. cited above, p. 174.
- 75 Ibid.
- 76 DCSAS, tele, 3419 17.7.1942 date, at 08:35, Col. Mancinelli.
- 77 Ibid., tele 3421, date 17.7.1942, at 11:25, Col. Mancinelli.
- 78 Between 10 and 16 July the *Sabratha* lost 122 officers and 1,846 NCOs and ranks.
- However the evening of the 20<sup>th</sup>, after the return of groups given as missing and of prisoners freed after short period of capture, as well as the staff of the backward bases the Division had 94 officers and 1,606 ranks (including 400 men of divisional departments and services).
- 79 see G. MANCINELLI, op. cited, pp. 146-147.
- 80 Historical Journal X Corps, f. 4699/Op. date 18.7.1942- Annex No. 26.
- 81 For duty of objectivity. we find that, even without any prevention or ill will, it is possible to give an excessively negative sensation of a story already unpleasant in itself, but not dramatic. Here Cavallero writes that two Australian battalions have caved in the face of two Italian divisions. Of course, he knew very well the strength of the opponents and the Battlegroups of "Italian divisions", as well as knew perfectly well that he had treated the fall of some stronghold. However, who is away or whoever will read after years such lines may not cringe (if Italian) or laugh (if foreigner), especially if not interested or unable to reconstruction minute of combat. Now, if this mode of expression -normal in war, where combatants are not inclined to measure with sling political words -you accepts Cavallero, more so you can understand in a Rommel..

82 Diary Cavallero, 17 July date.

83 B.H. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cited above, pp. 257-258.

84 In Rome it was working assiduously to send in paratroopers Division to North Africa, which have not yet called *Folgore* and temporarily will assume the name of *Cacciatori d'Africa*, with increased air transport. On balance, could arrive at their destination within the first week of August. A second division (*Pistoia* or *Piave*) could start the transfer by rail through the Balcania a short deadline and concentrate in Piraeus by the end of July. For mid-August, using aviation and maritime transport at the same time, was in Egypt.

In addition to the two divisions (the expedition of *Brennero* was still *sub judice*), was scheduled for shipment by air of at least 3-4,000 men of various units whose materials (tanks, self-propelled 75/18, from material of railroad engineers and pontoons) had to be transported by landing craft and convoys. The landing craft, once disembarked load at Marsa Matruh, would remain available to the Comando Superiore for coastal traffic.

85 In Rommel's memories there is no trace of this second visit. Referring to the 17<sup>th</sup> (as appears evident from The Rommel Papers), he reported the interview with Kesselring and Cavallero in these terms: "*again this [Cavallero] ostentatiously downplayed the importance of our logistical needs, to which I had mentioned with all clarity. There was talk and resumed the argument for a long time, until Kesselring and I demand concrete decisions.*

*Even this conversation revealed openly how grave the situation and how we could do little assignment on higher authorities in Italy. Cavallero promised that from now on, with the help of barges, the provisioning of the army would be increased and that within a short time the front line was put into operation. He promised to send other Italian units. However, we were rather suspicious after all experiences, and how the future was, we were right*" (E. ROMMEL, op. cited, p. 202).

Given the subject matter, one has the impression that the foregoing is a summary of two interviews, but especially that of 19<sup>th</sup>, for which see. No. 51 of the weekly *Tempo* 16.2.1958, article pp. 30-35, and the diary Cavallero.

86 DSCS, document date 19.7.1942-Annex No. 27.

87 Does not appear that any fact or memory of the Comando Supremo staff or R. Army is considered such a case. Therefore it is considered to be a personal opinion.

88 G. CIANO, op. cited above, pp. 637-638.

89 There are episodes which remain imprinted, positively or negatively. Not that it necessarily should be symptomatic of a character, however, appear in any way significant. One of those "negatives" was described by a reporter during a visit to the Duce to a British POW camp prepared on the spot. Mussolini forwarded, accompanied by Lieutenant Commander of the Italian field, among the crowd of prisoners South Africans who, at least at the beginning, not recognized him. "*Certain to spend in tents, not even moved; Marshal Cavallero, while Mussolini advanced speaking always with our officers, you leaped to them gesturing and screaming: 'Stand up!'*", whereupon those obeyed him, getting up slowly" (G. PEDOJA, *La disfatta nel deserto*, OET, 1946, Rome reported by LUCIA CEVA, *Africa Settentrionale* 1940-1943, Bonacci, Rome 1982, p. 113). However, the image of a Chief of the General staff which fires roared like a Sergeant against a group of prisoners to make them jump up in front of HIM is very, very unpleasant.

Another episode, reportedly by the same journalist, concerns more closely Mussolini, but has another taste: "Passing on Balbia some trucks loaded with prisoners, marching towards the West. The Duce, who became suddenly scowling, immediately asked a submachine gun and pistol in his hands, he wore it on the roadside telling those that followed: "If someone makes the sign of Victory shot on him" (...)" (reported by L. CEVA, op. cited, p. 114). Everyone is free to think that Mussolini was a bloody and really wants to implement the threat. We think, instead, be a silly challenge to bully, rich in very bad taste and low in style; However no murderous intent take effect. To Mussolini liked to 'hard' posturing and accentuate the volition of the jaw, in his opinion, strengthened this image. But now he was a man who tried not to see the abyss that was approaching.

- 90 DSCS, f. 2044/S date 14.7.1942 of the Italian military mission in Germany.
- 91 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 668.
- 92 it was IV/157<sup>th</sup> Italian paratroopers.
- 93 H. KIPPENBERGER, op. cited above, p. 184.
- 94 C. BARNETT, op. cited above, p. 317.
- 95 H. KIPPENBERGER, op. cited above, p. 188.
- 96 B. MAUGHAN, op. cited above, p. 578.
- 97 Historical Journal X Corps, f. 4747/Op. date 20.7.1942.
- 98 Kippenberger saw from afar the attack of 1/1st Punjab, ... *“Advanced developed smooth for about a mile. Made me think of one of 1916, with the waves that followed well aligned. Then he was stopped by heavy fire (...). The men remained standing helpless for a few minutes then the entire mass turned back in rout (...)”* (op. cited, p. 189).  
We must however point out that Kippenberger does not specify the unit, but merely mention “Indians”, and that places the action at 11:00 in the morning.
- 99 The Brigade lacked the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tank Regiment*, sent to reinforce the Australian 9th Division, and the 7<sup>th</sup> Fusiliers Brigade.
- 100 B. MAUGHAN, op. cited above, p. 579.
- 101 C. BARNETT, op. cited above, pp. 321-323. See also AA.VV., *Storia della seconda guerra mondiale*, Vol. III, p. 217.
- 102 C. AUCHINLECK, Despatch, p. 366.
- 103 AA.VV. op. cited above, p. 216.
- 104 DSCSAS, tele 3463, date 22.7.1942, at 13:50, Col. Mancinelli.
- 105 The German 361<sup>st</sup> Inf. was surrounded from the previous day.
- 106 DSCSAS, tele 3472, date 23.7.1942, at 10:10, Col. Mancinelli.
- 107 The data are those reported by the command AIT, which stated that the majority of the tanks was affected by the German-Italian lines and were therefore unrecoverable by the British. Liddell Hart provides two different directions: in *The Rommel Papers* says that the figure is “approximately correct” (p. 258), while in *The Tanks* reduces the number to 118 (p. 207). German tanks destroyed, and stranded, were only three.
108. The text of the citation was as follows: *“I to II bn. 61st infantry's my particular recognition for his valiant conduct in the defense [against] enemy attack supported by tanks that occurred on the evening of July 22. The battalion it is brilliantly defeated according to proven commonality of arms with German units and has particularly contributed to the defensive success. Rommel”*. The following day, Rommel personally decorated the Commander of the II/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. the Iron Cross 1<sup>st</sup> class and distributed 24 iron crosses for men of the battalion. The episode, far from isolated (Rommel was generous and ready in recognition of the merits), is cited because at that particular time of beneficial impact psychological battle.
- 109 DSCSAS, tele/13500 01/Op. date 22.7.1942, hour 19:15.
- 110 DSCSAS, tele/01 13512/Op. date 22.7.1942, at 23:50.
- 111 F. 149/Segr. date 22.7.1942- annex n. 28.
- 112 DSCSAS, tele 3470, data 23.7.1942, at 9:40, Col. Mancinelli.
- 113 DSCSAS, F. 3478 date 23.7.1942-Annex No. 29.
- 114 DSCSAS, f. 8242/Segr. date 23.7.1942 of the ACIT. Rommel ignored, but if between 17 and 23 July a remarkable pessimism did rack his spirit, in Cairo the atmosphere was hardly better. The 22<sup>nd</sup>, in fact, with Gen. Corbett, Chief of G.S., sent out the order of operations no. 134, which repealed previous directives, *“for the unlikely event that the enemy is strong enough to launch a large-scale offensive against the 8<sup>th</sup> Army before it can take the initiative ”* and listed a long series of defensive measures to be taken to protect the Delta (C. Auchinleck, Despatch cit., pp. 393-395).
- 115 Historical Journal XX Corps, date 24.7.1942.
- 116 Bastico letter of 25 July for Rommel, above, in which it noted that a general withdrawal was in contrast to the precise orders of the Comando Supremo.



- 117 Letter of Cavallero, 22 July, in full agreement with what's written by Bastico and which recommended to avoid any attrition. "
- 118 general directives issued on 22.7.1942, quoted in annex 28.
- 119 DSCS, f. 31740/Op. date 27.7.1942.
- 120 DSCSAS, f. 13926/01 Op. date 28.7.1942- Annex No. 30.
- 121 F. H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, p. 406.
- 122 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 46 et seq.
- 123 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, pp. 677-680.
- 124 B. MAUGHAN, op. cited above, p. 590.
- 125 Ibid, p. 594.
- 126 D. Y OUNG, op. cited above, pp. 225-226.
- 127 Weekly *Tempo*, no. 51, of 16.12.1958, article cited, pp. 30-35. To specify that the 28 was flooded in the XXI Corps half of the 164<sup>th</sup> German Inf. Div. (ternary).
- 128 the strongpoints were to be made at the level of battalion and divided into smaller strongholds of the company (which, at least those in Italy, did not have the means necessary for an autonomous defense, nor adequate fresh volunteers).
- Each battalion stronghold was surrounded by an external fence, on the back of which there were minefields beaten by machine gun emplacements. For masking materials shortages and to deceive the opponent, fake sites were built.
- The characteristics of the particular strengths is translated in the following data: a cornerstone of company: 700-800 m; depth of this cornerstone: approx. 300 m; intervals between repeat stations of the company: 400-500 m; width of a battalion sector: up to 3,500 m.
- The artillery had to be deployed in order to be able to intervene before the advanced strongholds. In some cases, the Group was placed in the cornerstone of the battalion; in other cases, they resorted to an array of artillery strongpoints on the back of advanced structures and variable distance, so as to preserve the possibility of isolated or mass action, according to the goals to beat in the sector concerned.
- We will return on such a defensive concept; for the moment it is sufficient to say that the cornerstones of infantry prescriptions could hardly find concrete realization and for the operation of artillery fire was made difficult because of the spaciousness of the sectors, the range limitations and shortcomings of transmissions and observation.
- 129 DSCSAS, f. 01/15035 Op. date 31.7.1942.
- 130 DSCSAS, f. 01/13975 Op. date 30.7.1942.
- 131 to Bardia and Sollum with the Jetty had been completely destroyed. While also in the first place the restoration was judged preeminent not (for the benefit of other commitments) provided very long and provided that the landing craft were able to take land without landing, at Sollum work was in progress and expected to be completed within the first ten days of August. However, here too the landing craft -were docking difficulties.
- Marsa Matruh was under the control of Adm. Weichold German and personnel already existed sufficient wharves or docking to sort 300 tons per day.

Eighth chapter

THE SECOND BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

1. THE PASSAGE OF THE INITIATIVE TO THE BRITISH

The fighting of July had stopped the run of Rommel and worn the Italian-German army, but also the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was exhausted.

On 27 July, at 14:45, Auchinleck signed an appreciation of situation compiled by Gen. Dorman-Smith. The document, purposely ignored by Churchill and Montgomery, is a thorough analysis of the operating problems of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army provides data and drawing of Rommel's maneuver for the battle of Alam el Halfa, indicates how to bust the Italian-German action and, finally, the criterion on which the next British offensive set: breakthrough in the sector of El Alamein <sup>(1)</sup>.

In summary, the comparison between opposing forces is that very difficult Rommel could hardly shortly achieve the superiority of troops needed to take an initiative:

"Throughout the month of August the alleged relationship of forces does not justify an offensive, unless we commit a serious mistake by leaving a gap. The enemy, however, can strengthen in the second half of August, although there is no news of something. On the other hand, the axis can make great efforts to strengthen the *Panzerarmee* in the shortest time possible. "

As for armored vehicles, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army's had at that time of about sixty tanks and in the first week of August I would have received the same, after which nothing more until September. The DAK, instead, by August probably would put in line 150-200 *Panzer* (M 14 Italians were omitted in the comparison). On the other hand, the British air superiority was absolute and was "*considerably active*".

Given the logistical factors, the features of the front and the positions which they supported the two devices, the respective possibilities are reduced to little thing. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army the could continue with more or less local actions in the hope of provoking an Italian-German failure before the arrival of reinforcements, however the attempts in the northern and central areas had failed for a variety of causes, including a

incomplete training, and nothing invited to try again seen consolidation made by the enemy. To the South the attempt had taken more than anything else is a the appearance of a distraction and, since the enemy appeared not numerous, perhaps a violent and sudden attack could offer an outlet to the British mechanized troops; However the only unit available was the weak New Zealand Division with artillery support not too consistent. On balance, the likelihood of success varied between 40 and 60%, and a failure would put New Zealand on the ground completely. Thus a tactical offensive, did not seem advisable.

The alternative was to remain on the defensive

“(…) as long as we are not strong enough to attack, which, unless the enemy no worse, won't happen before mid-September at the earliest. The obvious objection is that so we leave the initiative to the enemy if it is able to use it. [However] is very much doubt that it can take the initiative with some hope of success until the end of August. In fact, if attacked first, provided that we have in hand a reserve that includes at least one hundred *Grant* tanks, we have a good chance to defeat him seriously in the area of El Alamein – El Hammam [fifty kilometers east of El Alamein]. In addition, the critical period of preparation and preparation of the defenses of the Delta and Cairo is now finished. It is rather difficult for the enemy takes into account the possibility of turning the 8th Army on the ground currently occupied.

There will be a difficult moment at the end of August before they are ready the new divisions (two infantry and two armored), but you might get out of trouble preparing their battle groups of artillery in advance of the rest of the divisions and thus reinforcing the 8<sup>th</sup> Army (this project requires further examination)...”

As for the opponent:

“(…) should resume the offensive immediately, but is unlikely to do so before mid-August and even then it does not seem that it can have a real margin of superiority, except armored forces. Certainly will try to attack before the end of August and since the 8th Army's defenses earn higher strength and depth, will be tempted more than ever to avoid them and seek success in maneuvering. This can bring him in serious trouble in the desert, where the sand is soft.

As an alternative, you may have to adopt the strategic defensive, because our forces are too consistent and too well placed to attack them. If you choose this solution, can retain the positions [current] or retire on a line that protects intermediate Matruh, which could also be solved to our advantage because they would be shot again when we are again able to attack. If then withdrew to the Egyptian border, would be to evaluate whether it is appropriate to not let him go undisturbed.”

Ultimately, the best course of action seemed defensive, with occasional episodes, inducing Rommel to attack prematurely, i.e. in the second decade of August. In particular, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army might expect Italian-German action South of Bab el Qattara, leading into a winding of the southern flank. It was the need for a robust *mobile wing*, based on the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. Dorman-Smith as well: so he summed

“The enemy currently oversees with sufficient forces for the purpose a front from which cannot be dislodged with a maneuver or any attack the 8<sup>th</sup> Army is capable at the moment of launch. We are strongly positioned for a defensive battle. The enemy is trying to rearrange his forces and to renew the offensive against Egypt. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army needs training and new media before being ready for offensive operations.

During the month of August is to be expected that us and strengthen us firmly on the enemy positions; so it is unlikely for both sides the success of an action. If the situation on the ground and in the air does not change, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army in mid-September about can receive in reinforcements two armored divisions and two of infantry. This can ensure sufficient superiority to justify an attack (...). The long breath program is to train the divisions arrived recently for the counter-offensive that is hoped to begin in the second half of September.”

Three days later, Auchinleck summoned Gen. Corbett to report, from Cairo, and the commanders of Army Corps. After explaining and arguments set out in the said memorandum of Dorman-Smith, ordered Ramsden to start a project for the breakthrough in the area of El Alamein and, at the same time, Gott gave the study of the turning Italian-German southern flank led with a armor.

The meeting ended with a summary of the measures to be taken in view of a possible initiative of Rommel in late August. Between the sea and Ruweisat there were no breakthroughs to fear. The ridges of Ruwesait and Alam el Halfa, key positions, were taking a better defensive stance thanks to more works and would have allowed the artillery used in mass, to break the violent impact of the Italian-German operation. If Rommel had attempted to go to the East, the British counterattack would hit him on the left flank.

In London, Churchill couldn't restrain neither irritation nor impatience. Was decidedly unhappy with the progress of operations in Egypt and also very convinced that the command in Chief was not to rise to the occasion. Also Brooke harbored quite a few misgivings. While the first was already determined to make

clean sweep by many people, to beginning with Auchinleck, the second preserved a certain caution: “*he was clear-agreed-that there was something that absolutely wrong, but it was not easy at that distance to decide what it was and in what extent affect the situation*”<sup>(2)</sup>. Both left for Cairo. For Brooke the trip was planned long ago and included a visit to Gibraltar, Malta, Egypt, Persia and possibly India; Churchill instead taken at the occasion of a meeting with Stalin in Moscow to explain the replacement of *Sledgehammer* with *Torch*.

Before leaving Churchill received a telegram from Auchinleck dated July 31, a passage which he said:

“I chaired yesterday a meeting of commanders of Army Corps, in which he discussed the tactical situation. Because of our lack of reserves and later consolidation of enemy positions, we have to conclude, if reluctantly, that in the current situation it is not possible to renew our efforts to break through the enemy front or circumvention of its southern flank.

It is unlikely that the possibility of resuming the offensive reoccur before the middle of September; This will also depend on the ability of the enemy to replenish his reserves of tanks. Therefore provisionally will remain on the defensive, providing meticulous preparations and defensive features along the entire front.

Meanwhile, we will use any opportunity to immediately go on the offensive strike and the enemy by surprise (...)”<sup>(3)</sup>.

Churchill arrived on August 4 in Cairo, where he had also summoned Gen. Smuts from South Africa and on Gen. Wavell from India, more than convinced of the need to remove Auchinleck. After a few days of visits, inspections, interviews and consultations, the Prime Minister proposed to the war Cabinet in London “*a dramatic and immediate change in the Command-in-Chief.*” He suggested the reorganization of the Middle East into two distinct theatres of operations: the Middle East, including Egypt, Palestine and Syria, and the Middle East, limited to Persia and Iraq. Auchinleck would assume the command of the new Middle East, with the 10<sup>th</sup> Army, and Gen. Harold Alexander to the Near East, with the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> Armies. Gen. Corbett, head of the G.S.G. of the command-in-Chief, and Gen. Dorman-Smith, sub-Chief of the G.S.G., had to be replaced. Also for the 8<sup>th</sup> Army there were changes: Gen. Gott was proposed for the command of the army and Gen. Ramsden for his replacement; then they took new commanders for the 13<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Corps<sup>(4)</sup>. “*I am confident that the changes will give a vigorous impetus to the new 8<sup>th</sup> Army-* assured Churchill-*and will recreate confidence in command,* which unfortunately does not currently exist (...)”<sup>(5)</sup>.

The war Cabinet found questionable the reorganization of the entire Middle East, but came to accept the idea, especially since it was backed by Brooke and Smuts, and left hand free for the appointments of the new commanders. On 7 August, however, the plane on which Gen. Gott was on was shot down by a German fighter and the problem of the Commander of the 8th Army went back on the carpet. Brooke revisited who at the outset was his candidate, on Gen. Bernard I. Montgomery, and this time prevailed.

Auchinleck still was unaware that his fate had been decided. Churchill, "*having learned from experience that such communications are best to write then out loud*"<sup>(6)</sup>, the morning of 8 August sent by air a letter in which participated the War Cabinet and offered the command of Persia-Iraq area, together with that of the 10<sup>th</sup> Army. Of course Auchinleck refused and replied that he preferred to retire.

On 8 August Alexander arrived in Cairo and two days later Churchill handed him the directives:

"1. Your first and main task will be to capture and destroy the first chance the Italian-German army commanded by Field Marshal Rommel, along with all its supplies and with all its installations in Egypt and Libya.

2. You carry out or will ensure that other fulfills all those other tasks that are the responsibility of your control, without prejudice to the duty set out in paragraph 1, which must be considered absolutely more important in the interests of his Majesty"<sup>(7)</sup>.

The change of command was to take place on the 15<sup>th</sup> for all concerned. The 12<sup>th</sup> Montgomery arrived, had an interview with Auchinleck and welcomed the suggestion of him to go to the front to settle in three days available. At 11:00 of the 13 August Montgomery was in command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, said a look at the situation and sent a dispatch the 14<sup>th</sup> to Cairo announcing that he assumed command immediately. True it is, as he admitted years later in his *Memoirs*, held ready "*to leave quickly the Army Headquarters if there were repercussions.*"

On August 19 Churchill and Brooke returned from Moscow and found Alexander waiting for them with the latest Enigma decryption of messages, including a major dispatch of Rommel to OKW. This was the situation of the AIT on 15 August with the operational design for the planned and forthcoming offensive. Prefixed on the improvement of logistical conditions, the arrival of reinforcements, the reorganization of the Italian divisions, the establishment of a mechanized reserve

the completion of the works and defensive minefields, the document indicated the possibility of a British move later this month, but thought most likely to happen after mid-September, with three armored divisions and six to seven infantry divisions. The development of axis troops for an offensive would be completed as soon as the supplies ready in Italy. After that there was to be expected any real improvement for the AIT. The confrontation between opposing forces in late August showed an Italian-German superiority of 50% in the medium-caliber artillery and a slight superiority in armored (450-500 tanks against an estimated 400 tanks): all, sufficient for rapid penetration into the southern sector of the front, and a southern winding of the bulk of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. The situation would be changed significantly in September, English advantage. Therefore, only an action launched on August 26-first day of the full moon-had chances of success. To that date, the Italian-German army could be ready, but needed to be immediately shipped to Tobruk and Benghazi all materials prepared in Italian ports and that the supply of ammunition and fuel to the Cyrenaica was continuous. Otherwise would become inevitable moving the offensive of an entire month, but of doubtful prospects<sup>(8)</sup>. All the cards of Rommel were on the table before English eyes: the plan, date, forces, media, supply situation, air support.

Bearing this in mind and the reminder of Dorman-Smith of July 27, the meeting held by Auchinleck on the 30<sup>th</sup>, details on the present and on the future provided by Auchinleck to Churchill and Brooke on more than one occasion, it is inevitable some concerns to note emphasis as written by the *Prime Minister* and the Chief of the G.S.G.I. Brooke recounts in his diary:

“Montgomery that night proved in one of the happiest moments of his entire career (...). He knew that Rommel would attack at a certain date and showed us that alternatives were offered to the German General, as well as the measures he had taken to address them.

He said he considered the first alternative the most likely and a penetration within his southern front with a conversion to the North, toward the center of his positions. We explained how he broke the attack with his artillery and as he reserved his armored forces to reject it completely, after which the enemy forces had been decimated by fire. His armored forces would therefore rejected Rommel to the front that currently occupied and no further.

On his own, would continue with preparations to launch its offensive, that preparations had already started. He would attack in the northern sector of the front. Expected fierce fighting that would have lasted about a

week to break through enemy lines; then it would have launched his armored Corps (which was called *corps de chasse*) which had already established (...).

(...) I must confess that I was amazed at the speed with which was seized the situation he had to deal with, the skill with which he had grasped the essentials of lucidity of his plans and, above all, of his boundless confidence (...)”<sup>(9)</sup>.

Churchill, for his part, on the 21<sup>st</sup> sent to the War Cabinet the following report:

“1. I spent the last two days in the Western desert at the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Headquarters (...).

2. I am sure that we would go to a disaster with the preceding command. The army was totally disorganized and in the throes of a sense of disappointment and uncertainty.

Obviously, in the case of violent enemy attack, were thought to turn eastward, in the direction of the Delta. Many were beginning to look back to be sure of having a seat in the truck; had not been sent to the various units any precise plan of battle, nor had given them the feeling of being led by an energetic and strong-willed Command.

3. The situation appeared so serious that General Montgomery insisted to take command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army immediately after visiting the front and Alexander decided to exchange all deliveries between the commanders in the Middle East was accomplished on the 13<sup>th</sup> (...)”<sup>(10)</sup>.

The topics of interest are two: the possibility of a withdrawal to the Delta and the operating design about the defensive battle against the almost certain and desperate last effort by Rommel.

The hypothesis of the retreat was probably the heaviest criticism to the work of Auchinleck. Even Alexander and Montgomery talked about it. The first recalled the encounter with Auchinleck with much posting: “*I don't remember talking to him about matters of great importance; but I remained impressed his insistence to keep intact the 8<sup>th</sup> Army*”<sup>(11)</sup>, and in the official report at the end of the campaign wrote: “*it was generally known that, as a last resort, the army would retreat again, based on the theory that had to be preserved intact*”. As a result we now know that the next defensive battle was sustained to the bitter end on the positions of El Alamein.

In fact, the back features arranged by Auchinleck were notable for entities and forces. There were used the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp, to defend Alexandria and the Delta (as well as “welcome” the 8<sup>th</sup> Army in retreat), and the command of the British troops in Egypt, interested in Cairo and the Nile Valley. If all had gone to stone boundary, most of the army would have continued the retreat to Palestine, while the rest would have gone up the Nile Valley. For Alexander, Delta defense after the enemy breaching at El Alamein,



was meaningless expression therefore each measure operating on his behalf would be poorly placed. So, a week later ordered that the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp would orientation to reach the 8th Army and that the commander of British troops in Egypt (Gen. Stone) would provide for the safety of the Delta.

Montgomery also touched the button of any retreat as part of the army:

“All the instructions in force and plans for further retreats were repealed and I made known unequivocally that there would be no withdrawal from the line of El Alamein; if Rommel had attacked us, we would have stood where we were. This change of tactics (...)”  
(12).

Not only that, but in his *Memoirs*, he returned to the subject referring to the interview he had with Auchinleck. They resented and protested publicly stating that

“it is inaccurate and absurd to argue that, at that time, I was looking at a retreat from the position of El Alamein. A similar project had ceased to be taken into account from the beginning of July, 1942 when Rommel was forced to the defensive and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had regained the ability to attack”<sup>(13)</sup>.

Now, it is true that the idea of bringing to the Delta in desperate case, maximum valid until mid-July, appeared unlikely at the end of July and incongruous in mid-August, much more than at the beginning of that month had been deciphered *Enigma* messages transmitted two, a few days before by Rommel to Berlin, which were clear plans to launch an offensive and the impossibility of to implement it, at least for the time being, due to insufficient stocks. However, it is equally true that for Auchinleck kept full validity to the principle of removing any troops and elimination of those in the Delta forces seemed excessive, though retained therein by reason of training and amalgam.

The second argument is the defense plan, since after the war, Montgomery was charged with having as his own the memorandum of Dorman-Smith accepted by Auchinleck.

“I can not imagine - Alexander remarked-that Montgomery is interested in someone else's opinion on how to fight the war in the desert; and on the other hand in my conversations with General Auchinleck took command before there is any trace of a defensive plan resembled somehow the painting of the Battle of Alam Halfa as it came to actually fought,<sup>(14)</sup>

and alluding to the mentioned memorandum added: “(...) *It is a document*

*about 4,000 words, that for his prolixity would, I imagine, put aside if you ever had been under the eyes of the new Commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army”* <sup>(15)</sup>.

Alexander has devoted several pages to the subject, because a phrase of his official report had been used as crucial evidence against Montgomery. Having recalled that the plan was to hold more firmly the area between the sea and the Ruweisat and threaten any Italian-German flank penetration to the South of this, organizing the defence of Alam el Halfa Ridge, stated:

“(…) Therefore, I would say that the plan is developed naturally by itself. When I referred to the plan at that paragraph, I not certainly alluded to a plan formulated by my predecessor” <sup>(16)</sup>.

The offending phrase in the report is as follows: “*General Montgomery, now in command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, accepted the plan in principle and I’ve shared*” <sup>(17)</sup>. In this regard, Alexander said:

“This sentence, which among other things does not stand, was much quoted against Montgomery; but does not appear in the original, which is in my hands, and how it is over there so far has been the subject of idle conjecture” <sup>(18)</sup>.

Without wishing to enter into the old controversy, taking *Memories* pages certain apparent contradictions, one can conclude that the pattern of static defense of Montgomery more or less remained that of Auchinleck, also because the terrain was what it was and if, as was Alexander, the Italian-German offensive was at the bottom, pure rhyme for the British defense was the same. There were however, and on this we must agree with Alexander, very marked differences in the Organization of dynamic and reaction in the conduct of the battle. The importance of Alam el Halfa was not emphasized in the conception of Auchinleck, who seemed geared to a system of strongpoints tend to checkered and uniform garrisons. And although the ridge in question had already become, even in the opinion of Alexander, a sturdy staple, similar to those developed in the area of El Alamein since early July, from Montgomery was considered such a decisive value to focus on an entire Division. Also, while Auchinleck, who had adopted an articulation of the forces absolutely original, intended to keep the bulk of mobile field artillery (with his motorized infantry protection) and all armored units “*to attack with fire the enemy whenever he presented*”, Montgomery wanted to avoid until the last moment entry into the field of his tanks so that, as you were not expressed, “*somehow lured in to Rommel’s trap*”.

Finally, other measures taken immediately, he said, from Montgomery, such as replacing commanders and the influx of units online and supplies were in fact already in progress. Where he cleanly won was in psychological field and in that order.

Despite the praise given to Britain, doesn't seem at all that the morale of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was to land and that the units had lost confidence in Auchinleck, whose personal prestige among the troops was still very high. Montgomery knew how to accentuate and publicize the decisions already taken. Announced and ordered all-out resistance, explicitly rejecting the hypothesis of a possible further decline, waiting to regain the initiative. The simple and repeated affirmation of this firm intention and, above all, the arrival of fresh divisions made tempers before more convinced of the near future, then certain of victory.

The second problem I faced was that of the instrument. You know the revolutionary ideas of Auchinleck: the decision to give life to the "Brigade" group as fundamental piece, the appeal to particular groups of artillery-based combat, the use of *jock columns*. Everything, no matter what the difficulties of the situation and the possible greater flexibility given to the divisions, had led to the disintegration of the Corps objectively. As if that wasn't enough, he proposed to unify the Division, in order to make the army more maneuverable. With Gen. MC Creery, posted in March in the Middle East as expert in armored warfare (and now head of G.S.G. of Alexander), had been asked by Auchinleck about assigning an armored brigade to each Infantry Division and the establishment of a light Armored Division uniting all *Crusader*, and had expressed a refusal so alive to cause the dry warning that if it was not entered in this order of ideas he could also return in Britain.

This state of affairs was also influenced by the noted absence of coordination between infantry, tanks and artillery, which had weighed on many failed actions, causing a deep tension. Typical, in that regard, an observation of gen. Kippenberger after first battle of Ruwesait:

“In those days as part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, and not just the New Zealand Division, there was an intense feeling of mistrust, almost hostility, to our armored units. Wherever he felt telling units of other weapons left in trouble; was considered axiomatic that no tank arrived in time where they were expected”<sup>(19)</sup>.

The decryption system known as *Ultra* was receiving a better organization. Four SLU (*Special Liaison Units* = special units) were installed in the Middle East: one in Cairo for the commanders in Chief, at the command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, one at the *Desert Air Force* and a fourth at Malta <sup>(20)</sup>. Partly due to this, partly because the operational stagnation and the need for a quick reorganization caused Rommel with reports full of data, the pulse of the Italian-German army was heard by British commanders as never would have dared to hope. On August 17 the picture received the final brushstroke: Rommel decided to attack the 26<sup>th</sup>.

Unlike Auchinleck, Montgomery did not admit that the Italian-German penetration could lead behind the defense, but to avoid this danger was in need of other forces. He knew that in the Delta there were divisions assigned to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, although not yet ready for battle. Since it was deemed not defensive to rush many risks using just a few units, and on the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> did ask the immediate dispatch to the front of the 44<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. (Gen. Hughes), scheduled for the end of the month. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> the Division took its line: its 132<sup>nd</sup> Brigade passed under command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Division, which was always with two brigades, and replaced the 21<sup>st</sup> Indian Brigade at Alam el Halfa. So the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp (still held by Ramsden) had the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, the 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa and the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian, all lined up on a remarkable depth, with the 23<sup>rd</sup> Armored Brigade in reserve. Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> was completed the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp (given to Gen. Horrocks) with the 2nd New Zealand Division, the 44<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. and the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div.

He was also created a broad plan of deception spreading fake minefields, preparing false positions, showing groups of fake tanks. The measure then considered a determining factor for the failure of Rommel was the deliberate loss of a topographic map of the slopes wearing makeup and practicability: in particular, a Sandy Springs area south of Alam el Halfa was presented as a solid background. Actually had no great influence on the events.

The 16<sup>th</sup> the command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was moved to Burg el Arab, by the sea, close to the *Desert Air Force* and the proximity of the two Commands allowed a strong fellowship in cooperation air-ground agreements. From August 20 bombing missions on the battlefield objectives doubled and “a round the clock” bombing began the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The 24<sup>th</sup> decryption of an *Enigma* message of the 21<sup>st</sup> provided a

sensational news: Rommel, sick, had asked to be relieved by Guderian! and at midnight of the 25<sup>th</sup> it became known that the OKW had no General of armored troops available for such replacement and that therefore the Marshal Kesselring would take the reins of the AIT. Obviously, under those circumstances, at least on the day of the beginning of the offensive became uncertain, especially since other *Enigma* communications showed that German troops needed even 15,000 additions, that consumed more than AIT were increasingly reducing their autonomy, and that the difficulties in terms of fuel were serious.

On 28 August the DAK was passed by 133 average efficient tanks of the first of the month to 234, of which 171 (?) Pzkw III J with long-barreled 50 gun and 26 Pzkw IV J with piece from long-barreled 75, while the Italian XX Corps had risen from 96 to 281 tanks, of which 234 medium. Also on the axis air forces news abounded. At the end of August the *Fliegerfuher* had reached 298 aircraft and the Italian 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet 460.

Finally on the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup>, when the full moon period was about to end, *Ultra* confirmed that the Italian-German offensive was not cancelled and in the late afternoon of the next day other wiretapping and the *Desert Air Force* warned that the enemy had gathered to attack <sup>(21)</sup>. But Montgomery was quiet. Had over 700 tanks against just over 500 of the enemy; most of the anti-tank regiments had received 6 lb pieces and many infantry battalions 2 pounder guns; the positions of Ruweisat Alam el Halfa and were fortified and tightly policed; the axis aircraft 750, of which a third part could not be consider usable, the *Desert Air Force* was at least 500 efficient; all confirmed that Rommel, in poor physical condition, it was going for a desperate attempt.

Meanwhile in the Mediterranean had Britain played a very important card. Despite the new axis air offensive, Malta was slowly regaining a decisive influence in the conduct of the war in North Africa, but the intense and fruitful activities of its planes, always kept in number, caused heavy fuel consumption. It was therefore necessary to set up another convoy.

Operation *Pedestal*, as it was called, had different characteristics from the previous one of mid-June. First of all, it was clear that by its success or its failure would have depended on the fate of Malta and probably of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. Secondly, the strategic situation prevented from launching anything from the East. So accordingly

it was necessary that the escort of convoy might appear so powerful to keep away the Italian fleet, that the share of the escort to protect the merchant ships until the island was increased, the number of overall fighter (aircraft carriers and Malta) would be the fight against both fighters to attack axis bombers. The severity of the undertaking appeared to overcome thanks to two events in other theatres of operations: the suspension of Arctic convoys to Russia and the American victory at Midway, who had dropped the urgency of a reinforcement to the fleet in the Indian Ocean.

Operation *Pedestal* was carefully prepared. The convoy, named WS. 21/S, consisted of eleven British ships and three escort and was divided into two groups. Force Z (Adm. Syfret), composed of the carriers *Indomitable*, *Victorious* and *Eagle*, the battleships *Nelson* and *Rodney*, three anti-aircraft cruisers and fourteen destroyers, was to accompany the convoy to the mouth of the Strait of Sicily. Force X (Adm. Burrough), consisting of three cruisers, a anti-aircraft Cruiser and twelve destroyers, would have continued with the merchant ships up to Malta. Logistical support was provided by Force R: two tankers and two tugs, escorted by four destroyers. In reserve, for various tasks, were eight destroyers.

The aircraft carrier had embarked altogether 82 fighters and 28 *Albacore* torpedo bombers. Was added at the last moment the carrier *Furious* with 38 *Spitfire* destined for Malta, which had been reinforced by units from Britain and Egypt, yes you can use 177 combat aircraft efficient and 16 reconnaissance. Eight submarines, two in northwestern Sicily enlarge patrol and are in screen function South of Pantelleria, completing the device. This was the most powerful fleet ever had escorted a convoy to Malta. In the Eastern basin of the Mediterranean was also simulated a convoy, which is headed to the island, for diversion.

The ships passed through the Strait of Gibraltar in the early hours of August 10. Were reported by agents of the axis, but in Rome Supermarina had already been warned by several days and the British move was expected. Unfortunately, such an intervention of battleships from Taranto there wasn't even to think, being deprived of fuel, so it was decided the use of submarines across the convoy route between the Balearic Islands and the Strait of Sicily; Mas and PT boats in night action between Cape Bon and Pantelleria; the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Naval Division (six

Cruisers and eleven destroyers) South of Pantelleria in the morning of 13 August.

In the airfields, the planes of II *Fliegerkorps* was temporarily reinforced by Kesselring and slowed the pressure on Malta, so that since the evening of the 11<sup>th</sup> could count on 426 combat aircraft. With these was to make an initial attack at dusk of August 11, mass action the following day and interventions based on the development of the operation on the 13<sup>th</sup>. Superaereo, meanwhile, ordered the Air Force Command in Sardinia, which put online 180 aircraft, focus maximum effort on the morning of 12 and then continue according to the circumstances, and that the Air Force Command in Sicily, whose availability amounted to 126 aircraft, to attack in mass on the afternoon of the 12<sup>th</sup> and then, also, will govern with respect to the evolution of the situation.

The first contact took place at 13:15 the August 11: *U-boat* U 73 torpedoed the carrier *Eagle* which sank in eight minutes. At sunset there was the first German air raid brought by thirty aircraft, without however cause damage to ships. The 12<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> August days were crucial. For the first, and last, time the Sicily channel device was made effectively. The axis forces were able to sink in these three days two cruisers, a destroyer and nine large steamers and severely damage a carrier, two cruisers, two destroyers, two ships and a tanker, and bring down or to sink 44 planes; the attacker losses amounted to two submarines, 32 aircraft Italian and Germans, while 18 suffered damage two Italian cruisers and a German torpedo boat.

Although the operation resulted in a significant tactical success for the value axis, the other the incompleteness of this success, on which we, was likely to result in a real advantage to the English: the arrival in Malta of 32,000 tons of supplies and 11,000 tons of fuel consigned to Lord Gort to arrive at the threshold of winter, albeit with a hard, rationing and resume air operations against maritime traffic headed to Libya (22).

After operation *Pedestal*, the latest to encounter strong opposition, was enough for Great Britain the use of fast surface units and submarines to replenish the island mainly fuel oil needed for light ships, again located in Valletta, to act against the Italian and German steamers.

## 2. THE ITALIAN - GERMAN INTENTIONS.

Just ended the series of fighting in July, Cavallero would face a problem on which few weeks reflected: the change of organization of high-level command in Africa. On July 30, after having gone to confer with the King in Rome (28 day) and with Mussolini at Rimini (the 29<sup>th</sup>), noted on his diary something important: *I get Scruero* [Secretary of war]. *New order be given to Libya. Bastico just now ... This is the opinion of the Duce. Relations Bastico -Rommel-Barbasetti. You must take the direct dependence of Rommel Comando Supremo.*" Within ten days the measure was launched. Next to the dissatisfaction with the work of Bastico, whose negatives was not mentioned, emerges the desire to drive on Rommel operational without intermediaries. Non-operational aspects resorted instead to a "coupling", as called Carmona: the delegation of the Supreme Command in North Africa (Deleaze). The Comando Superiore of the armed forces. N.A., ruled by Bastico, promoted to marshal of Italy, assumed the name of Superior Command of the armed forces of Libya (Superlibia), with military jurisdiction all over pertinent to the General Government of Libya. Deleaze instead, headed by Gen. Barbasetti, but should initially continue to retain the post of head of the G.S. Superlibia, had the task of providing the logistic supply of Italian armed forces operating in Egypt, to coordinate the Organization and efficiency of Italian supplies with those Germans across borders and to assume command of the rear area. All based on the directives of the Comando Supremo, and making use of the Intendenza N.A. and its branches; Libya Navy command with the coastal fleets and port organizations in Benghazi, Derna, Tobruk and Bardia; artillery command and Superlibia engineers for what he had to do with the aforementioned tasks.<sup>(23)</sup>

As you can see, here we are exactly in the context of the duties of a regular management of the theater. In addition was placed under the command rules of conduct of Deleaze the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet with Italian air forces stationed in Egypt. Certainly the new order could not meet Rommel who acquired greater freedom of action; but equally certainly had an artificiality not at all necessary.

No one can doubt that the Comando Superiore was very burdened by his numerous attributions: harming twice



the Office of Governor-General of Libya and Comandante superiore, coated by Bastico with harm a bureaucratic process that led up to his level even the most modest issues. And also undeniable that the logistics organization broadly left to be desired due to the multiplicity of tasks and an inadequate scaling command, but it must be recognized that not infrequently Rommel had obtained by applying directly to OKW or the Comando Supremo by von Rintelen, decisions at odds with the views of the Comando Superiore; Kesselring, whose disagreement with Rommel was known and obvious, more than once he had interfered in the operations, albeit for good; they often had imparted Riccardi and Fougier orders to the Navy of Libya and 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet without even informing Bastico; that, finally, the Comando Superiore had never had the slightest interference in the flow of supplies from Italy. However, the measures taken are not such as to persuade.

In fact, out of the blue Superlibia was devoid of its own logistical apparatus and, therefore, forced to turn to for any reason, Deleaze not only will allow the organs and also keeping them means to their dependencies (!), but not necessarily each focus attention on the theater. So when in Rome the hypothesis of an Anglo-American landing in French North Africa was considered in very remote not perspective. So the management N.A. exercised its jurisdiction on a depth of territory of about 2,300 kilometers through three delegations of Intendenza: No. 1, headquartered in Tripoli, provided for the needs of Tripolitania; No. 2, in Benghazi, No. 3 Cyrenaica, located at Matruh, to those of AIT. In essence, first, when he was under the orders of the Comando Superiore, it powered the No. 3 Delegation leaving a certain autonomy, at least in terms of adherence to the development of operations; now, it was oriented to the East, Deleaze could little appreciate the “territorial” needs of Superlibia.

After the war, Mar. Bastico wrote in a private correspondence:

“(…) But contrary to my explicit opinion, well known to Gen. [sic] Cavallero, (...) also on Gen. Cavallero was convinced that, within a few days, Alexandria would fall into the hands of armed forces N.A.; and I- don't know but if wrongly or rightly so-I was always of the opinion that the decision to take away the top command of the armed forces and form a N.A. Delegation reporting directly to Comando Supremo is not blameless convenience not to split between three people the glory of the coming triumph of Alexandria, while one could very well keep with only two”<sup>(24)</sup>,

but in the only official sheet that is posted on the subject from Superlibia, after the change, Bastico wrote: "*The first month of new experience given to the high commands. N.A. (...) lets say that the system has worked quite regularly (...)*" and, besides certain clarifications of attributions, asked its own Intendenza. From the Cavallero diary is made rather than another person touched the issue *apertis verbis*. 19 September Major Melchiorri, Chief Superlibia propaganda and national Adviser, wrote in private to Cavallero, whom was familiar:

“(...)Creation of Delease in my opinion increases the chances of dissension among the various commands in North Africa. If before we had disagreements between the Italian Supercomando and the German command, that possibility now also occurs between Delease and Superlibia, carrying two to three reasons (...).

The creation of increased personal Delease already understaffed, increased business practices, increased contact needs, has embarrassed many offices and creates serious concerns to Superlibia, which should apply to its needs for Delease with certainty now that not all his demands are understood and answered in a timely manner (...)

Indeed it seems that Mussolini has shown hesitation and reticence in front of the measure, which evidently do not convinced, in an interview had 10 August with Cavallero. These then the next day he took care to send a personal note to the Palazzo Venezia the Duce:

"I am referring to your communications yesterday about the Organization of the command in N.A.; allow me to expose you with devout mind some subordinate considerations.

The project to the Italian-German army under the Comando Supremo does not arise, as you know, from the desire to liberate Etc. Bastico: but by an objective necessity: that is, give to our command action and collaboration in respect of that the army tightened energy and effectiveness that a series of causes they now fall short, as it was found.

You know, Duce, I am concerned to safeguard the person of Comrade Bastico; which, to clear out the terrain immediately from this topic, can not find unwelcome that promotion to Marshal of Italy fall when, for reasons above, he stops by the Superasi Command. This form and this way of reward are to our best military tradition.

On the other hand it seems to me that such cessation and the Italian-German Army under the orders of the Comando Supremo is no news in the press. It is exquisitely, so military news.

Already it is not to remain secret; but the public will realize

little by little; in a short time will be entered in the consciousness that the guide is almost directly into the hands of the Duce.

But alongside this is another topic on which I should like to draw your attention.

It is clear that those who must care for a vast territory as Egypt and Libya, must wait in the care of the government as well, absorbent cannot project itself, with the *extraordinary energy* that the situation requires, on the tasks involved, much more than the actual operational command, the complex organization of supplies, ports, communications, defense, through to those vast spaces with tight organization that it was found *not to exist* partly to inadequacy of means but also very much to blame men.

This was, more than anything, a great reason to decrease, partly undeserved, our prestige. Not hatred; but inside the *cracks* that appeared so has crept and creeps, with its many and strong branches, the Germanic side. This penetration is continuing, while, through a manifest lack of action, opened the way to a prevalence of Germanic elements, major and minor, unrelated to the real Rommel army, which act but to fulfill their duty, but, as far as we are concerned, we have been replaced in many parts not desired extent. Even the leaders, Kesselring, Weichold and other minor advantage of this situation to prevail more every day.

Faced with this situation appeared necessary:

1<sup>st</sup> -entrust tasks, even if *partial*, and organizational ones to a body that could devote entirely, without being distracted by other concerns;

2<sup>nd</sup> -to strengthen this body with men of power and safety, on the directives of the Comando Supremo;

3<sup>rd</sup> - this organism in terms of being able to speak on behalf of the Comando Supremo, therefore with the authority that derives from the *flawless operation*, as well as from higher authority from which the organism exudes;

4<sup>th</sup> - allow the Comando Supremo direct intervention is to support the action of this body is to act on its own initiative as required, without means delays.

Duce, the pace of our work in I.N.A. is such that only direct action can cope with the needs and the difficulties every day increasing, even to March alongside the activities of our German comrades who, having to wait for this task, I only strive with exceptional energy, realizing their small and big goals and establish that comparisons are not always to our advantage.

The current organization of the command in I.N.A. does not allow us to do what is necessary; While what has been decided assures us the immediacy of an action that, if well directed as you can give us urgent that we need results at any cost.

As I fully understood the high political importance of your considerations, Duce, so escapes me not political value and prestige which, alongside the military, has the situation which I deal, situation that matter correct as soon as possible and at any cost.

With measures which were decided this will be achieved, hope promptly.

Those measures, Duce were provided to Superasi after that I felt to have your approval; and were also disclosed to the Germanic, and it agreed with certain rules of common interest. The German side has informed the OKW and gave notice to Marshal Rommel.

So Superasi has issued any executive provisions for the entry into force, which is to take place tomorrow the 12<sup>th</sup>, Italian military authorities so as to Marshal Rommel.

Allow me now to take the subject, so that being the case, a suspension of the measure, in addition to arrive late, would in our military structure in N.A.I. a not favorable repercussion, as happens for countermand in General. As for the part, this considers the measure as definitive.

I believed my duty, Duce, expose you the considerations that my conscience and my devotion I suggested; After this you will want to give me orders will be faithfully executed”  
(25)

It is a controversial letter in every respect, however Mussolini went on to join and the restructuring came into force on August 16 instead of the 12<sup>th</sup>.

All the Italian command organization, even at the highest level, had serious imbalances caused in part by mentality, partly by the combination of charges, in part by the presence of German bodies to which you could not give orders and that, on the other hand, you don't want to intervene too much in Italy. The no form control elements, willing to highlight the Italian character of the war in the Mediterranean and in North Africa, was a ball to the foot from anything but slight weight.

The report about the Mediterranean entrance of 39 British ships between 00:30 and 02:00 hours of 1 August arrived at Supermarina around 04:00. Later came the news that the first morning a dozen enemy ships had left Gibraltar. At 11:15 Cavallero telephoned Gen. Santoro, sub-Chief of the G.S. of the R. Air Force, which confessed openly to ignore the incident. Whereupon Cavallero ordered to begin surveys and prepare the torpedo bombers and fighter escort, then phoned Adm. Riccardi berating the misinformation of Supermarina and Superaereo. After this working example at the top, give a hint of the relationship between air and naval commands of the two allies.

On 23 July they met at Taormina Fougier, Kesselring, Commander of the Air Force (Gen. Sade) and Commander of II *Fliegerkorps* (Gen. Loerzer) for an examination of the question of Malta. It was back when topical, for Hitler's pressure, the choice between operation C 3 and exploitation of the success pushed in

Egypt had fallen on the latter. The June 30 Kesselring had summoned the Gen. Scaroni and Loerzer, communicating that, based on the decision to use confidential units for C 3, Air Force Sicily and the II *Fliegerkorps* were to unleash a new vigorous air offensive on Malta with all their forces, to ensure the convoys travel in Libya. He was optimistic, too, apparently infected by the euphoria general, because in his opinion "*in three or five-day offensive can be restored, if not supremacy, at least the balance*".<sup>(26)</sup>

The offensive lasted five days but not fifteen and led not to the desired results, and indeed it seemed that the reduction in losses of merchant ships was due more to lack of fuel and ammunition in the enemy camp than the effectiveness of the raids of the axis. On 14 July, transferring to the units made *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika* inevitable abandonment of bombings and the transition to active *defense tactic*, aimed at preventing the aggressive activities Malta aviation, rather than to investigate the destruction. It was a stopgap obliged that even less of the offensive was to continued emergence effective; in fact, catching on the fly given breath, the *Royal Air Force* on the island and was reinforced to rage against trains and airports in Sicily.

When, therefore, the July 23 the above-mentioned Conference took place in command of the OBS was notable dissatisfaction in all.

"The debate-he then Santoro-had animosity and characters almost of drama which never had been in meetings like that. Starting from the observation that the aid of fighters in that last week was not that promised, especially for the fact that there always some units had been used two or three times in the same day, Commander of the II CAT., supported by Marshal Kesselring, came to accuse the Italian Air Force have not as I make myself one of the importance of the situation in Egypt, and the fighters of Sicily not being sufficiently committed like the Germans, in the task of keeping in awe the Malta air forces.

The head of the G.S. R. Air Force and Commander, air force acknowledges that the employee activities fighter units could not be maintained at the level always hoped and desired, had promised to dwell on the miseries of our situation, to show that this was not due to unconscionable lack of understanding and commitment from staff but to many causes, some of which, other contingent of character (...).

It was concluded that men could take greater efforts to normal possibility (which moreover occurred in Sicily, since the number of pilots was often higher than the number of available aircraft); but that, by

the machines worked much beyond the limits of construction features, you would be going the risk of not having a period somewhat efficient aircraft (...)”<sup>(27)</sup>.

Kesselring and Loerzer eventually declared to recognize-and difficulties in the context of the resumption of the pressure on Malta as best possible, daytime actions were entrusted to German bombers escorted by fighters, mainly Italians and those for Italian bombers at night.

Of course there were also contrasts in the naval sector:

“The situation of OBS compared to Italians-reported Adm. Weichold to SKL-is difficult because as far as they in critical cases turn for advice to the command, then end up doing what they want, especially to escape the execution of their decisions taken narrowly. In the Mediterranean there is unity of command, but an attenuated form of plurality of command reached through multiple agreements and good will of the Chiefs”<sup>(28)</sup>.

We return now to operation *Pedestal*. Apart from the fact that the question of an attempted landing in Tunisia was to fall only on the evening of the 12<sup>th</sup> when the convoy was halved, the day of the 12<sup>th</sup> saw the person of the Chief of the G.S. General feel engaged possibilities and opinions of the armed forces involved, Italian and German, and then end with the decision of Mussolini late at night.

It was to choose the tactics to be employed for the ultimate destruction of the convoy. Supermarina had established the meeting of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Naval Division in the Tyrrhenian Sea on the afternoon of the 12<sup>th</sup> to focus South of Pantelleria at dawn on the 13<sup>th</sup>. But at 08:30 of August 12 that Cavallero received a telegram of Kesselring, who claimed to not be able to provide naval forces protection because all his fighters was engaged in escorting the bombers, and suggested the use of minefields.

At 10:30 Cavallero had a first interview with the Chiefs and Sub-Chiefs of the G.S. of the R. Navy and R. Air Force. Adm. Riccardi informed him that the minefield was laid and two enemy ships had crossed without losses due to pure chance, then remembered that the intervention of the naval group was subject to a minimum of protection. Cavallero then wanted to visit Mussolini with Riccardi and summoned Fougier and a second afternoon meeting also von Rintelen and Weichold. These, who had tried in vain to convince Kesselring to support naval action at 14:00 to find useless notified his participation if not present

also a representative of the OBS. "Please inform Gen. von Rintelen-noted Cavallero in diary-that the meeting was to decide on the escorts. Since he is not there, the meeting is abolished ".

Obviously, something had to be established, and in the afternoon, at 16:35, and Sub-Chiefs of the G.S. of the Navy and Air Force met the Comando Supremo. The latest news on losses that the British convoy was undergoing were comforting. Riccardi claimed to be satisfied with 18 ships in the day, to allow an escort of nine hours. The resulting exchange of ideas is reported in the Diary of Cavallero:

"Etc. Fougier judges them insufficient. Amm. Sansonetti says he will do 30. Do I mind that you have to use what you have and establish are 24. Etc. Fougier adheres, but does not guarantee the quality [it was a newly formed group and some RO. 2000] and adds that enemy forces are superior to ours. Confirms, however, that the attack will be tonight from Sicily without counting the German (...).

Wonder in the Adm. Riccardi if agrees the use of naval force in relation to the risk. Adm. Riccardi says that should not. Etc. Fougier says this is just the opinion of Mar. Kesselring. I say that the risk is not in enemy naval force, but in that enemy air because Malta is good. So if the Navy does not engage you can save the escort. Adm. Riccardi agrees and says that for the Navy the risk is too great (...)"

The 17:30 Cavallero, Riccardi and Fougier returned to Venice Palace and illustrated to Mussolini. "*The Prospectus Duce that there is German air escort and that is not yet well defined the possibilities of our escort*" noted Cavallero and, upon returning to the Comando Supremo, he dismissed the two chiefs of the G.S. urging them to reflect well on this topic and to each to say clearly tonight to the "*Duce their opinions, one on the use of naval force and the other on the possibility or otherwise of escort*".

It's not over. The new meeting at 19:30. Fougier proposed to wait for the results of the aerial action on convoy, whose losses were confirmed, and then conclude whether or not the use naval forces with the Italian stock of dubious effectiveness. Riccardi said he could wait until the decision until the following Sunrise, but with the escort and given the seriousness of the threat from Malta not considered appropriate to kick off the cruisers. Sansonetti added that the important forces of the *Royal Air Force* in Malta had caused little trouble until then, evidently because it intended to hit our naval formation that had ventured into those waters. The seat was dissolved and

Cavallero, Riccardi and Fougier returned to Palace Venice (20:45), where the issue was pending.

At 23:00 Mussolini telephoned the Comando Supremo. Here Cavallero had once again summoned the military leaders involved; He summed the news and put out our naval formation had been sighted by the enemy and “*recently had over 3 reconnaissance and 6 bombers. All night will be subjected to attacks*”. Then explained that, according to Riccardi and Fougier, present, ships were worn for the entire night and the next day they would be found invested by aerial attacks departing from Malta, “*then the incurring in risk is not paid by a corresponding yield*”. In essence, the decision was that the continuation of the attack against the convoy would be entrusted to the R. Aeronautics and the OBS (from which came no news). The 3<sup>rd</sup> Naval Division headed towards Navarino in support to the 8<sup>th</sup> Division, held insufficient to counter the British formation reported in the East, and the 7<sup>th</sup> Division returned to the base <sup>(29)</sup>.

There is also another version on the development of events, according to which:

"On the evening of August 12, Supermarina and Admiral Weichold fought long against Superaereo, Kesselring and the Comando Supremo to ensure the escort to the cruisers: but, as he wrote in the previously mentioned document Weichold, " *This resulted in a hot debate between the leaders of the different armed forces, during which the representatives of the two Navies were only against each other. Then you called for a decision to Mussolini, who spoke in favor of airpower. Therefore, the operation of the cruisers, which had already started, interrupted* ". In this way we lost a unique opportunity for an overwhelming success of the Italian ships" <sup>(30)</sup>.

Santoro stated flatly not to retain any memory or have found any trace in the Superaereo of that conflict and disputed that the last resolution had been caused by the fact that " *German-Italian aviation seemed intolerable to be placed in the second plan* " <sup>(31)</sup>. Of course it is that at the highest level this crisis just does not seem to have occurred. It is also possible that the friction in the contact occurred between the various offices.

Supermarina regarded the operation as a victory, of which much was up to excellence high performance offered by the use of mass naval insidious means. Santoro admitted at the end of the war, the Italian aviation achievements were " *modest and not proportionate to the means employed, the efforts of the crews, from losses they suffered* " for a complex of causes of various kinds <sup>(32)</sup>.



Adm. Weichhold remained very embittered. It was wrought with Kesselring, in with all the arguments in favor of naval intervention and expressing the opinion that if not it would be nuanced the total destruction of the largest British convoy that had never directed to Malta. But the head of the OBS had not accepted the proposal, therefore, granted the fighter protection of the Italian ships.

“To understand the perspective of Kesselring-explained-it should say Weichhold that he basically didn't believe the possibility of tactical success of Italian cruisers. The failure of the second battle of Sirte, in which a division of Italian heavy cruisers could not prevail on five small British cruisers, and the poor results achieved by the Group of Italian Cruisers in the battle of Pantelleria, had influenced the opinions of the *Luftwaffe*. The Chief of the Italian Navy G.S. dependent the above decisions: Mussolini, called by Cavallero by telephone, believed not to be able to put in open contrast with Kesselring, for use in the fleet. On the other hand the staff of the Navy did not want to take responsibility to use the cruisers without the support of the *Luftwaffe*, and then the continuation of the ongoing naval operation was interrupted (...). Italian and German aircraft, whose support in favor of the Italian ships had been rejected, but managed to sink only two transports”<sup>(33)</sup>.

We return now to North Africa to summarize first the new organization of Superlibia and then the logistics situation in mid-August.

From the Comando Superiore were to depend on three separate bodies, whose functions, although mainly of backline, extended the operating field, both for the raids of the *Long Range Desert Group* and mobile columns formed ad hoc, both for threats coming from Tibesti and Kufra, both for the case of politico-military changes in French North Africa.

The Defense Command Tripolitania (Gen. Armando) included the fort of Tripoli (Gen. Mannerini) and sectors of Zuara, Garian, Homs and Sirtico, and had approximately 24,000 men. The Defense Command Cyrenaica (Gen. Hemi) included the Fort of Benghazi (Gen. Zarri) and Agebadia areas-Gialo, Barce, Derna, Tobruk and Giarabub -Siwa and had 14,000 men. The military command of the Sahara (Col. Piatti del Pozzo), that by September will pass under the Defence Command Tripolitania, holding the Hon, Sebha and Gat with 5,000 men. In total, including the police and militia, Superlibia had at its disposal 43,000 men, of whom 12,500 Libyans.

The logistics situation was far from encouraging and the crux of the problem was the absence of a flying in suitable materials to Libya, i.e. a level of autonomy that will sustain the note

uncertainty of maritime transport, the losses for air strikes and the unexpected of the operational situation. Since the beginning of the war supplies had always been lower than the ordinary consumption, except for rare exceptions momentary, so that availability had gone gradually shrinking alarmingly. By now it was estimated that only just over a third of the ships managed to touch the Libyan ports. The "voices" in crisis related vehicles, fuel, ammunition and flour.

The vehicles appeared to be an unsolvable problem. In late July, the large units were missing about 2,000 trucks compared to the organic, designed to carry wheeled *only the material* of infantry divisions type AS 42. Thus the Italian infantry had to not only walk, but drag on almost all of the pieces to 20 mm and from 47/32 and back up machine guns and mortars. Divisions *Ariete*, *Littorio* and *Trieste*, for their part were forced to leave behind a third of the force, especially infantry and services.

The Comando Superiore had but one maneuver Autogrouping but that, after the transfer to the Germans a whole autograppo (300 trucks), it was reduced to a few hundreds of trucks, and for the extreme wear diminished more and more. Even the Superintendency was formed a Autogrouping for logistics maneuver drawing ruthlessly divisions despite Command protests. It was early vehicles worn from use too intense in the worst environmental conditions. He had also, and it was the backbone of its efficiency, a mass of a thousand civilian trucks, all-reaching and almost all with a trailer, by which faced the demands of the so-called 'service', that is the long-distance transport on the via Balbia.

Even the performance of repairs of 30 and 40 can not be meet because the output of the workshops could not equalize the number of incoming inefficient means. The commissariat had four automobilitici parks, very reinforced staffing and equipment compared to the organic, but the vehicle failed continued to increase. The main reasons were found in the exceptional wear resulting from the increasingly urgent use of resources and a lack of regular maintenance; by the shortage of spare parts; from large and rapid shifts in the front that ended up putting in crisis, and for several days, the parks and that caused heavy losses of materials; and attacks from the air (shrapnel that pierced engines, tanks, tires).

As for the fuel, to get an idea of consumption just take

Note that, as part of a corps parked and operating conditions of stagnation, movement of vehicles was calculated on 2,000 kilometers daily to the need for reconnaissance, resupply, etc. Total consumption were then about 600 tons per day in normal period and reached the 1,000 tons per day in times of increased operational activities. Had been scheduled a range of 1,000 kilometers with an addition of 500 kilometers of fuel as “intangible” stock. It was little things into the kind of war and only had a few days break in the flow of supplies to ordinary grave crisis the Army Corps.

Nor was becoming much better the ammo situation, since the battles in July had caused much more significant consumption of the previous period. Thus the stock of some calibers of artillery went down below the *unfoc* (from 100 to 150 shots per piece).

Finally, the limited availability of flour had given moments of great anxiety and forced more than once to reduce the ration of bread using the troops biscuit provisions, most frequently damaged. In addition, it was necessary to think even the civilian population, Libya far from being self-sufficient in terms of diet. It is true that shortly after the Armistice with France had been created an institution called civil *Acorguerra* (procurement and coordination of war economy) for the needs of the population; but that body suffered the same difficulty of Comando Superiore and ended up holding on to the military administration, exacerbating the already difficult situation in which floundering the Intendenza..

In late July the Comando Supremo made the point again. The program supplies to Libya, compiled at the end of March, provided for a monthly posting 75,000 tons of materials, quantity considered essential to ensure the supply of Italian and German troops and to establish an autonomy of at least two months. In the May-July quarter supplies (excluding fuels, tanks and vehicles) had achieved the following figures:

| tones transported |                   |                    |              |                               |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------|-------------------------------|
| <u>month</u>      | <u>to Tripoli</u> | <u>to Benghazi</u> | <u>total</u> | <u>steamers<br/>committed</u> |
| May               | 60,400            | 27,800             | 88,200       | 30                            |
| June              | 20,000            | 4,200              | 24,200       | 7                             |
| July              | 14,800            | 30,200             | 45,000       | 14                            |

For Tobruk trafficking is not considered in this table because no cargo steamship was sent in July, barring a few German personnel transports, some tank, some submarines and certain cabotage operations.

To ensure an average of 75,000 tons./month it took 22-24 travel steamer. The port of Benghazi could absorb only relatively limited unit tonnage and Tobruk was engaged by the Germans for sending units. In those circumstances, the Comando Supremo decided to affect Supermarina and direction to Transport Superiore “*intensify even transport by Tripoli, at least double than implemented during June and July.*” However in August the Comando Superiore was a worrying situation. From May 25, the beginning of the battle of el-Ain Gazala on 1 August, stocks of food and ammunition in Libya were at that *halved* and those of fuel reduced to *little more than a quarter*.

No wonder, because the arrival of new units in Africa, such as the *Folgore* and *Pistoia* Inf. Div., could not affect ordinary consumption.

The Comando Supremo was not persuaded of the thing, but had to admit that “*the possibilities of ammunition are starting, rough, hardly sufficient to cover the consumption and to this must be added that on a monthly basis does not always manage to start the quantities allocated for tonnage deficiency*” and, of course, apart from the losses for sinking<sup>(34)</sup>. Two weeks later, redoing the math, in Rome noted that not only the total amount of materials sent to Libya in the first half of August amounted to just 15,000 tons, but still remained to bring 24,000 tons overseas. ordinary supplies of July, excluding fuel. In this regard, it will not be wrong to point out that the entity reference tonnage shipped may result in misunderstandings. For example, when not specified, such tonnage also included vehicles and armored vehicles. And, unless transported by tankers, the quantity of fuel that was posted on the merchant needed to deduct the weight of the barrel.

The resolution of the Comando Supremo is established on obvious enough points: keep at most start-ups of ships in Benghazi and Tobruk; program for 25-30,000 ton Tripoli. monthly materials and vehicles; limit boarding of vehicles to a maximum of 140 per motorboat, so reserve at least 3,000 tons. in foodstuffs, ammunition and other materials; increase the use of tankers. For the second half of August was planned the expedition of seven steamships in Tripoli and eight motorships, and thirteen cargo steamers

four troop transport to Benghazi and Tobruk, for a total of 50,000 tons, excluding fuel.

For petrol and diesel the discourse was even more complex. First of all, the quantities landed in Tripoli had to deduct the consumption arising from ordinary transport to El Daba, while the burden was halved at Benghazi. And of course it was necessary to count the return journey. Then the calculations were made based on average daily consumption of 80 tons for aviation gasoline, 135 tons for those cars and 160 tons for diesel, amounting to a total requirement of 30,000 tons monthly. Without entering into the merit of these estimates and ignoring whether they were needed for transport from the ports of landing at the front and losses due to war, the situation was giving a range in Libya until 26 August for aviation gasoline, until 23 August for that car and until September 9 for diesel. With the August 16 arranged supplies such autonomy would be extended until the beginning of October for petrol and October 1 for diesel. This, of course, if the quantities shipped arrived in Libya were intact.

Of course greater attention focused on armored vehicles. The XX Corps on 5 August reported 117 tanks and 38 average recoverable within a week; 14 L6 tanks and 17 recoverable in a few days; 17 armored cars efficient 11 more repairable within nine days. Since turnout were consistent from Italy, is calculated to put in line for medium tanks, August 20, 310 medium tanks, 50 light tanks, 80 armored cars and 25 self-propelled 75/18. On the same date the DAK had 117 tanks of all kinds, including 47 Pzkw III type J and 15 Pzkw IV type J, and it was believed that for the 20<sup>th</sup> could deploy about 250 tanks. For against the armored vehicles of the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army was assessed by the Comando Superiore of 150 tanks and 75 armored cars at the front, more 300 tanks and 60 armored cars inflowing.

The supply of staff was another sore point. The total budget of the losses incurred by the AIT (dead, wounded and missing) from 26 May to 31 July was 15,070 Italian and 12,500 German, not compensated losses of arrived in July (about 3,400 men for large Italian units), even less, from parts of new units arriving in reinforcement (about 2,676 men of *Folgore* and 2,064 of *Pistoia*). For the purposes of remittance of the Corps in Egypt, the staff of the R. Army ordered the set up between 3 and 20 August of seven infantry battalions, three of Bersaglieri and one of *Giovani Fascisti*; eight tank companies; three groups of 75/27 T. M., four of 100/17 T. M., a self-propelled of 75/18; one pioneer battalion, a connections and two companies telegraphers; and also the

constitution by August of seven companies of infantry and three of Bersaglieri, and ten batteries<sup>(35)</sup>.

Other units instead were already waiting, such as the engineer battalions of the *Littorio* and *Giovani Fascisti*, and 500 vehicles with conductor. On the rescheduling of the losses and the sending of reinforcements, not major problems existed in Italy, except two of importance though: the basic quick preparation involved insufficient training<sup>(36)</sup>; the preparation units not meant that they were already overseas. Very little, in fact, than required by the Comando Superiore landed in Libya during the summer and early autumn, and if you can't get in doubt the goodwill and commitment of the Central Authorities is difficult to say what organizational efficiency was equal to it<sup>(37)</sup>.

Moreover, too many decisions were taken as impulsively and were implemented with more clutter than speed. In Egypt the *Folgore* could serve as example. The paratroopers Division (this was his original name) moved to Apulia in June to complete the training for operation on Malta. In the second fortnight of July he was suddenly ordered to relocate to Africa, without clarification of the task which it was intended. Left by air from Lecce and Tatoi (Athens) personnel with the equipment, individual equipment and parachutes, unit weapons and equipment supplies and ammunition. Departed by sea, from Brindisi, the heavier material and trailers. Special introductory material, which was to be transported by means of R. Navy, was held in Italy, when part of the Division was already in El Alamein, due to the decision to use the large units such as infantry.

The hasty departure, the lack of guidance on future task and the widespread feeling of a launch action not allowed to ask to distribute in due time as it would take to life in the desert. The transfer was very slow, so that the Division, which had started the movement in mid-July, he received the last units the August 6. Materials and vehicles landed at Benghazi came online only in part (because rates were moved to other units or were lost) and only in mid-September, helping to make even more difficult the life of the Division. Maybe the *Folgore* could enter in a more organically.

The second aspect of the supply of staff concerned the question of reassignments and licenses. All commanders of large units had agreed to report the urgent need

to adopt decisive measures, serious the repercussions of being a State of fact on the mind and heavy on men's physical, especially since they knew that the Germans were alternated after a year. Similar disparities in treatment contributed to put even more the Italian soldier in the position of inferiority compared to the allies, especially noting that they could overcome the difficulties of maritime transport and airplanes.

Nor, objectively, it was easy to switch troops in line with rounds of rest in the rear, the precarious given availability of forces. Even in the few cases of temporary withdrawal of units from the front lines, they could not benefit from a real rest, being always employed in tasks associated with operations, such as securing supply lines, quick roundup of enemy items, infiltrators works on lagging positions etc. De Stefanis wrote:

“It is necessary to decide on the necessary measures to implement them as soon as the operating permits. This in order to prevent serious deficiencies. Don't forget that our soldier is very clever and makes the comparison with what is practiced against the German comrades (...). You will avoid such incidents in the war 1915-1918 gave rise of *Sassari* Brigade troops, for example, and you will take away from the minds of the survivors that now for them there is no liberation if not by death, or deforming injury or captivity. Are expressions that unfortunately I understood myself with my ears and from multiple sources it have been reported.”

Ultimately, we can say that on the eve of the battle of Alam el Halfa the morale of Italian troops was lowered in tone than the one with which they reached the El Alamein line.

This framework only knew what he had Rommel an eye. Was glad to have truncated the British ambitions in late July, the consolidation of the face and the influx of units, complements and materials. This explains the upbeat tone by an exchange of views with Kesselring <sup>(38)</sup> and an interview with Barbasetti (10 August), during which he declared himself “*satisfied overall*” because “*the serious crisis of the second half of July is passed.*” The line was robust and the AIT command had finally been able to withdraw nearly all reserve armored and motorized units and give depth to realizing large device of mined pockets, lined with sturdy pillars and watch on the front side. Almost half of infantry battalions was now a second line of strongpoints.

Also in the field of armored, Rommel had observed, the situation looked under a favorable light. As far as the amount

it was more or less equal to that enemy, playing quality advantage of DAK: each *Panzer* was worth three *tanks*. The same could be said for the artillery, given the superiority of German heavy batteries (150 guns and howitzers from 210) while remaining still unsatisfactory anti-tank weaponry and ammunition and lacking the means to transport them. And also for aviation the notes were good, aside from the scarcity of fuel. The balance of forces in place should improve with the announced arrival from Germany by other means, including 200 tanks, but there was doubt that to arrive in time for the resumption of the offensive.

In summary, Rommel looked "*with full confidence in the near future.*" In the event of an English initiative, likely in the short term in the northern sector of the front, the deployment offer extensive guarantees to weather the storm; in the case of the forthcoming German-Italian offensive "*the chances of success are important*". Of course, it was necessary to make every effort to strengthen the army.

Examined with several related matters this expansion, Rommel passed to operational understandings:

“Mar. Rommel-reported Barbasetti-believes it is necessary to provide the offensive before the enemy has received large convoys in route and before the laying of minefields, in rapid progress, have created prohibitive conditions to quick and decisive action.

On the other hand is necessary, among other things, wait until we reach at least part of the reinforcements already under way in Africa and aviation gasoline.

Between these opposing needs, and also taking into account agreements with Marshal Kesselring, is determined that the attack will take place, unless unforeseen circumstances on 26 August (between 24 and 28), a full moon, so you can start and continue operations effectively at night”.

The maneuver relied on surprise, about which was sacrificed the preparation of artillery and air force. Across the front of the infantry units were to launch three big blows, well supported by artillery, designed to engage the enemy and possibly attract mass the reaction of British Armored units. The magnitude of these sectoral actions should be such as not to impair the strength of defensive device. North would have operated units of the *Trento* and the German 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div.; in the Center units of *Brescia* and the *Ramcke* Parachute Brigade; in the South units of the *Folgore*.

Meanwhile the mass of maneuver would start from the collection area south of Deir el Qattara, gradually assuming a deployment from West to East, facing north, and then a big conversion to the left, until cutting the coastal road



and close to a large sack on the big opponent. In essence, it was the repetition of the pattern of the battle of Ain el-Gazala, but without being back another Bir Hacheim.

“At this point- Barbasetti continued-the battle will be conducted with the aim to annihilate enemy forces. And therefore will decisively towards the East, to cut the road between Alexandria and Cairo. Further developments are not foreseeable for now. So said Marshall Rommel, who proves to be extremely confident in success. ”

The meeting ended very cordially. Rommel said the new command organization in Africa, confessed that the days of mid-July *"were the most ugly and tormenting his military life, the densest of anxiety and moral depression"*, admitted that aid provided by the Comando Supremo and the Comando Superiore his trust *"has gradually restored and returned to the temperature of the beautiful days of Tobruk and Marsa Matruk"*<sup>(39)</sup>.

When the synthesis of the meeting arrived at Rome, Cavallero leaps. What he meant is *"determined that the attack will take place, except in unforeseen circumstances, on August 26"*? I spoke with von Rintelen expressing the intention to make precise representations<sup>(40)</sup>. Already two days before, von Rintelen, had manifested a keen disappointment to the directives given by Kesselring to Rommel about the possible resumption of operations in Egypt and shared the idea of beating the English weather, could not allow that others could reach not determinations of their expertise: *"they are issues that need to be decided by the Comando Supremo he had said "*<sup>(41)</sup>. Then resolved to travel to Africa.

Arrived on 16 August at Derna, after a brief stop at Taormina, OBS, headquarters for a brief contact with Kesselring and Fougier. The following day, clarified various aspects of the organization of command and examine the logistics with predispositions, Bastico Barbasetti and von Rintelen, dictated the directives for Rommel to advance about Delta and later to the Suez Canal. They confirmed the validity of the June 26<sup>(42)</sup> directives, then touched the highlights: the starting point was represented by the positions held at the time, who had to be policed for every eventuality; translated task in beating British forces deployed in the West of the Delta; the first goal was Alexandria, also in order to use that port at least partly for the extra boost to Cairo; the following objectives were the region of Cairo and the Suez Canal.

“The Italian-German army-secured-will in a few days by a assembly of forces and means that will confront the enemy successfully. It is making the maximum effort to address certain deficiencies still exist in terms of fuel and ammunition; a limited number of trucks for the Italian units of the army may still come within the current month.

Similarly, it provides for supplies involving the two air forces Germanic and Italian. Preparations are underway to ensure the subsequent supply of the advance.. So you are implementing arrangements by Delease materials necessary for passage of the Nile (...).”

And ended with the conclusion:

“The date of commencement of operations is necessarily subject to the condition that the current program for the transportation of supplies, especially fuel, did not suffer arrests or failings of important character. It is desirable that the action can develop as soon as possible. I will submit for approval to the Duce the date of your proposal”<sup>(43)</sup>

On 18 August the directives were presented personally by Cavallero to Rommel, Kesselring, commanding the AIT. There is no minutes of the meeting, but the debate had to be conducted in an atmosphere of harmony. Rommel had returned to a gloomy pessimism. He was critical of the Italian logistics organization<sup>(44)</sup> and did not hesitate to show considerable mistrust in the ability to conduct successful offensive. The German units were still 14,500 men (including 2,500 NCOs), 210 tanks, 195 anti-tank pieces and 1,400 vehicles. The XX Italian Corps, which was to be one of the protagonists of the battle, It was capable of carrying just four of his ten battalions and 220 tanks available there was the expectation that founded more than half stopped in the desert for only mechanical failure and incompetence of the drivers. As fuel and ammunition, the levels were dramatically insufficient and supplies from Italy proceeded to hiccup. First there was disruption caused by operation *Pedestal*; then, the 15<sup>th</sup>, had lost the seventh fast motorships in little more than two months; then, the day before, British torpedo planes attack the *Pilo* convoy at the islands of Kerkennah and submarines the *Bixio* convoy on the eastern route had caused the sinking of another motorboat and caused serious damage to a ship. It's clear that everything contributed to creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and mistrust, which at that time was how much worse could happen.

Cavallero ensured the Comando Supremo would get the necessary and timely, stressing the importance of developing logistics, stated that "*the first battle we give is*

to make sea transport flow, after which is the glorious and difficult action of the Germans”!<sup>(45)</sup> Kesselring, meanwhile, assured him that the *Luftwaffe* would allow the influx of supplies in Libya and, where necessary, delivered 500 tons a day by air. It seems that Rommel was very skeptical, but eventually shrugged saying he would attack if and when he had received the necessary<sup>(46)</sup>.

However the germ of doubt started to fidget and just that night with Gen. Magli, Comando Supremo, informed Cavallero that

“the situation induces Supermarina consider Tripoli route temporarily closed (not so the *Pozanca* will be started in Tripoli) and stay for two or three days to the East, route to exercise intense submarine hunting & muster strong escort for starting a fuel convoy”<sup>(47)</sup>.

Returning to Rome, Cavallero sought in every way to balance the accounts of maritime transport, but without many results, partly because of the inadequacy of fuel oil for the R. Marina, whose minimum monthly consumption was about 75,000 tons, while from Romania, the main source of supply, were 50,000 tons per month and from Germany 10,000, numbers all theoretical, especially for German supplies. If you consider that of 75,000 tons the 51% requirement was reserved for escort to convoys and 13% to merchant vessels used for supplies to Africa, you will see that almost all of the 60,000 tons Romanian and German oil was destined to just that traffic.

On the other hand it was necessary also to take account of local general consumption and this inevitably led to a significant reduction in inventories, as well as to remove even the fuel oil of the cruisers, paralyzing the activity even more of the fleet. On 19 August the situation had become so critical to provoke an intervention by Rommel, very sketchy as usual, at the Comando Supremo:

"After mature examination of all weather and the need for the planned undertaking, confirming that the requirements proposed in the conversation of the 18<sup>th</sup> current must be considered as minimal. And must also carry behind the Alamein during offensive operations, at least as a mobile reserve, the *Pistoia* div., assigned at the time.

You must count on vigorous counterattacks against the enemy's North wing during the offensive. Mobile forces for the defense cannot be released by those currently available”<sup>(48)</sup>.

On this basis, von Rintelen, who had travelled to Cavallero the message in question, he felt forced to propose the renunciation provided for

the offensive, given that ground forces and German air forces in Africa had a total of 8,000 tons fuel economy against the 30,000 tons acknowledged as indispensable. By Kesselring himself, who was also present at the interview, admitted that start an operation like that in those conditions would have been too risky: the sinking of a tanker could immobilize the German armored units in the desert.

Faced with such a stance and, as if that were not enough, the news that Gibraltar was force H set sail with three battleships, two aircraft carriers, Destroyers and seventeen steamers, Cavallero said if Rommel could postpone the offensive at 30-31 of the month, but Kesselring responded negatively. Cavallero insisted and illustrated the program of convoys to be implemented no later than August 28, with priority to transport fuels:

1<sup>st</sup> convoy: tanker *Pozarica* (7,000 tons of fuel, 1,000 which for the Germans) and steamer *Istria* to Benghazi;

2<sup>nd</sup> convoy: tanker *Alberto Passio* (2,800 tons of fuel for the Germans) and *Abruzzi* (500 tons of gasoline) and steamers *Delphi* (470 tons of gasoline for the Germans) and *Kreta* to Tobruk;

3<sup>rd</sup> convoy: Motorships *Unione* and *Manara* for Benghazi;

4<sup>th</sup> convoy: tanker *S. Giorgio* (2,400 tons fuel for most Germans a thousand barrels of gasoline and lubricants) and possibly tanker *S. Andrea* (4,000 tons of gasoline), and steamers *Camperio* and *Tergeste* for Tobruk;

5<sup>th</sup> convoy: steamers *Ruhr* and *Amsterdam* to Tripoli or Benghazi.

After a brief debate, the conclusion shared by all, was that the measures taken were sufficient “*for the preparation of the offensive*”. As for the next feeding, everything depended on the availability of fuel oil, which made it necessary to a separate study. In other words, before deciding the operation, it was necessary to find a solution to the problem of the fuel oil.

On 21 August arrived at the Comando Supremo another message of Rommel, always about supplies. Cavallero replied with two telegrams. With the first, in essence, recalled the terrible difficulties of maritime transport, also because of the latest loss of ships, and tried to instill confidence, confirming that “*he is making the maximum effort to bring to Africa as still missing, especially in fuel and ammunition.*” The second dispatch held on the operational plan:

“1. The Duce approves your proposal in principle given for operation within the framework of the directives given on August 17.

2. Duce confirmed order because measures for replenishment underway turnout are intensified.
3. Communicated as soon as possible your intentions outright”<sup>(49)</sup>.

Replicating Rommel was very accurate. The offensive was started on condition that they are made of the following premises:

- a. arrival at Tobruk and Benghazi, by the 25<sup>th</sup>, the first three convoys with 2,000 tons of fuel and 500 tons of ammunition;
- b. arrival at Tobruk, before the 27<sup>th</sup>, the fourth convoy;
- c. arrival at the front, before the 27<sup>th</sup>, the vehicles needed to motorize six battalions and five batteries of XX Corps, as well as the means for the supply of the *Folgore*;
- d. guarantee arrival before the 30<sup>th</sup> at Tobruk and Benghazi the other 3,600 tons of fuel and 2,000 tons of ammunition.

If these conditions were not met, the plan, designed to use the full moon period, would have fallen and the offensive had to be postponed and, of course, set to other bases. However, in September the enemy would have been greatly strengthened and consequently the AIT would have needed not only a total completion but also a reinforcement of new German troops. This regardless of the likelihood that in the meantime moved people.<sup>(50)</sup>

The 23 and 24 August were hectic days. Mostratasi false information of the output force H from Gibraltar, Cavallero, Riccardi, Santoro, Kesselring and Weichold feverishly devoted themselves to find a solution. A glance at the Cavallero diary you can not shake off the heavy cloak of pain caused by frantic search beyond the Mediterranean a few thousand tons of material to begin with, note well, only to begin the offensive<sup>(51)</sup>. And; already it seemed victory can *kick-start* these few thousands of tons, even knowing that Benghazi was over a thousand kilometers from the front and that the same Tobruk, the most important port for Rommel, was still at 500 kilometers away from the AIT and subjected to a continuous night bombing, which destroyed the port and ships parked<sup>(52)</sup>. We studied the measures to protect convoys, Lists hollow out partly the cruisers, are aimed on speed and on and ignored the desperate calls of Rommel and reassuring answers of the *Comando Supremo* (via von Rintelen) and Kesselring, one and other precise dates and data, were *read* by the enemy, which could comfortably get in the hunt at the appropriate time and then ,

just as easily, check with new *Ultra* decrypt the results of the attacks.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> the Comando Supremo advised Rommel that the German units would receive 225 tons of fuel on 25 August; 2,470 fuel and 242 ammunition on August 28; 3,000 fuel and 580 of ammunition on September 1 and 1,000 fuel and 1,650 of ammunition on 4 September. Also the 28<sup>th</sup> would be landed at Benghazi 285 vehicles and 4 for September 215 truck for other Italian units. The requested materials for the bridge will come between 2 and 4 September<sup>(53)</sup>. Von Rintelen commented that day that “*we did everything we could*” and that the major preoccupation was the fuel oil. Cavallero answered him sadly that “*you live for the day and you can't work on certain programs*”, then said: “*but it will arrive*”.<sup>(54)</sup>

Meanwhile, it was a real bomb. A couple of weeks Rommel was bad: low blood pressure, gastrointestinal disorders, wear and tear, been anxious, not more than bearable conditions at his age and given the tension which was submitted. On 21 August the Chief of the G.S. of the Army, Gause, forwarded to the OKW a telegram, in consultation with the attending physician, communicating that “*field marshal Rommel is suffering from gastroenteritis, chronic nasal diphtheria and significant circulatory disorders. Is not in a position to conduct the upcoming offensive*”. Cavallero was informed by von Rintelen, the next day at 13:30. Noted in his Diary:

“Get on Gen. von Rintelen (...). Rommel's request at OKW for his replacement. Problems ensue. Wonder if there are other reasons. Von Rintelen believes no. Wonder if Rommel or not will the offensive. If not, we shall probably put us on the defensive.

Demonstrate that the situation based on a wrong man. Here is the result.

Von Rintelen telegraphs the OKW asking clarification. I insist if the Italian side was made anything. Von Rintelen ensures that speaking with Rommel [these] with him complained that he feels bad and is really tired.

I say that the situation is complicated and I hope it can be resolved well; wonder if they have a man capable of replacing it. Von Rintelen ensures that Yes, but I say that everything necessarily will change with this replacement. I insist in saying that I have the impression that no one from Italian side missed, but that if measures will be taken. Leave him telling him that I am waiting to know the clarifications of the OKW.”

A few words of comment stands out. And more than understandable that the loss of a ventilated Commander like Rommel, especially on the eve of an offensive that is envisaged with very narrow margins

successful, caused deep concern, but "*Proved that the situation based on a wrong man. Here's the result*" doesn't make sense. He would when Cavallero added: "*Just for this eventuality the Comando Supremo decided to take the AIT reporting directly to it*" and, under this profile, "*wonder Rommel if will or will not the offensive*" attests to the pretext for the reasons given for the change of command organization in Africa. Totally unacceptable, then, the question is "*if the Italian side was doing anything*" and the intention to take action where this had happened.

As is natural, the argument was paramount. The afternoon of the 23<sup>rd</sup> von Rintelen remarked that the offensive depended on the State of health of Rommel, while Kesselring was convinced to cast it anyway. Cavallero shrugged, repeating the Comando Supremo and requests answered "*If a negative decision will we then suspend the action. This doesn't depend on us*". Then, after a moment of reflection, asks

"if it is the case that the decision of the offensive is made by the Comando Supremo. With Gen. von Rintelen responds that he does not consider that he assumes a similar responsibility. The action is desirable, but we don't decide. I agree and say that in fact the Duce has approved in principle. His person is out of the way and we have to be completely right" <sup>(55)</sup>.

It seems difficult to approach similar attitude with the reminder which Mussolini was forced to modify the command line!

Rommel was really sick but probably on his spirit had some weight even the sense of mistrust arising from a situation of more than evident uncertainty logistics. Anyway, on the one hand bother to indicate the imperative for a preliminary ruling for the operation, on the other hand thought to substitute. He suggested to the OKW the name of Gen. Guderian, to which he wrote directly, but the proposal was rejected: Guderian was unavailable because not in good health <sup>(56)</sup>. At first, Hitler turned to the Gen. von Mackensen, but he was too busy on the Russian front. Since then that Kesselring had hinted to be willing, if necessary, to take over the top management of entrusting operation to Gen. Nehring, battle's conduct was therefore on Kesselring that the thought of Hitler came.

For a few days, uncertainty reigned as nobody, neither in Rome nor in Rastenburg, wanted to force the situation. Rommel was to

dissolve doubts<sup>(57)</sup>. The 25<sup>th</sup> asked Kesselring to visit him in Egypt and at the same time telegraphed the OKW which, in the opinion of the doctor, was able to retain command of the AIT for the impending offensive under continuous medical supervision. After would return to Germany. The OKW's response was immediate: "*the Führer has been informed and has allowed that he [Rommel] enjoy a long license period for disease in Europe is not just defined the situation in this theatre of operations*"<sup>(58)</sup>.

The 26<sup>th</sup> Barbasetti warned Cavallero that he was summoned by Rommel to an examination of the flow of supplies and to decide on the offensive. Kesselring, who was to leave for Egypt, expressed the belief that a deferral until the 30<sup>th</sup> seemed possible without any damage and showed firm on the need to attack. In the afternoon we learned officially that Rommel would remain in place. The news was reassuring. On the other hand, the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup> Cavallero read a disappointing Barbasetti telegram, sent the previous evening after visiting the AIT Command:

“In today's interview the specialist (...) have stated that the same conditions confirm for him. In these conditions he is not (saying no) feels to take care. It is his understanding to wait for arrival of the second medicinal package of four whose recital your 32130 current & 23<sup>rd</sup>, when will quantity & especially examined really medicines arrive, will make a judgment about possible early care and about development of it”<sup>(59)</sup>.

A few hours later came a communication to Rommel: the arrival of the convoys would be the 27 with 28 or 29 due to the delayed departure. "*Therefore, any decision on the implementation of the operation can be communicated only on 29 August*" the telegram concluded.

Rommel's refusal to embark on an adventure was objectively justified. As he told Barbasetti the 26<sup>th</sup>, with the fuel and ammunition situation at the time you couldn't go into battle. Without the availability in Marmarica, or at least in Cyrenaica, as essential to the power of the offensive, the alternatives are reduced to two: give up the offensive, contenting himself with the balance held by the close of El Alamein, Siwa and the coast (and avoiding unnecessary consumption of precious supplies) or, in the best case, launching an attack with limited objective, namely to give a jolt to the British dispositions. The fact remained that, lost the opportunity of full moon period and wanting to wait for the next,



the issue is complicated: to beat an enemy greatly strengthened would become necessary an influx of other German divisions.

Nor did the meeting with Kesselring improved things a lot. Kesselring, first found in Tobruk an organization so unsatisfactory as to cause him to ask Barbasetti the immediate centralization of all power of the Italians and Germans in one person (Adm. Lombardi), then, speaking with Rommel, appears to have shown a mood quite different from that indicated by Cavallero in his diary:

“Kesselring came today for a long conversation on the most urgent of our problems- wrote Rommel to his wife on the evening of the 27<sup>th</sup> -. He, among other things, has a difficult job in Rome. Receives a lot of promises, but few are preserved. His great optimism towards those nefarious individuals has turned into bitter disappointment (...) ”  
(60)

Accusing the Comando Supremo to give assurances lightly is certainly not fair, but undeniably too many organizational shortcomings could not but seem irritating and disappointing, especially to his eyes. It was inconceivable that a country at war for more than two years had militarized the Merchant Navy, that the pace of construction was still more or less that of peace, which were missing equipment to Tobruk “*because permission is the responsibility of the corporations*” (as noted angrily by Cavallero in his diary), etc.

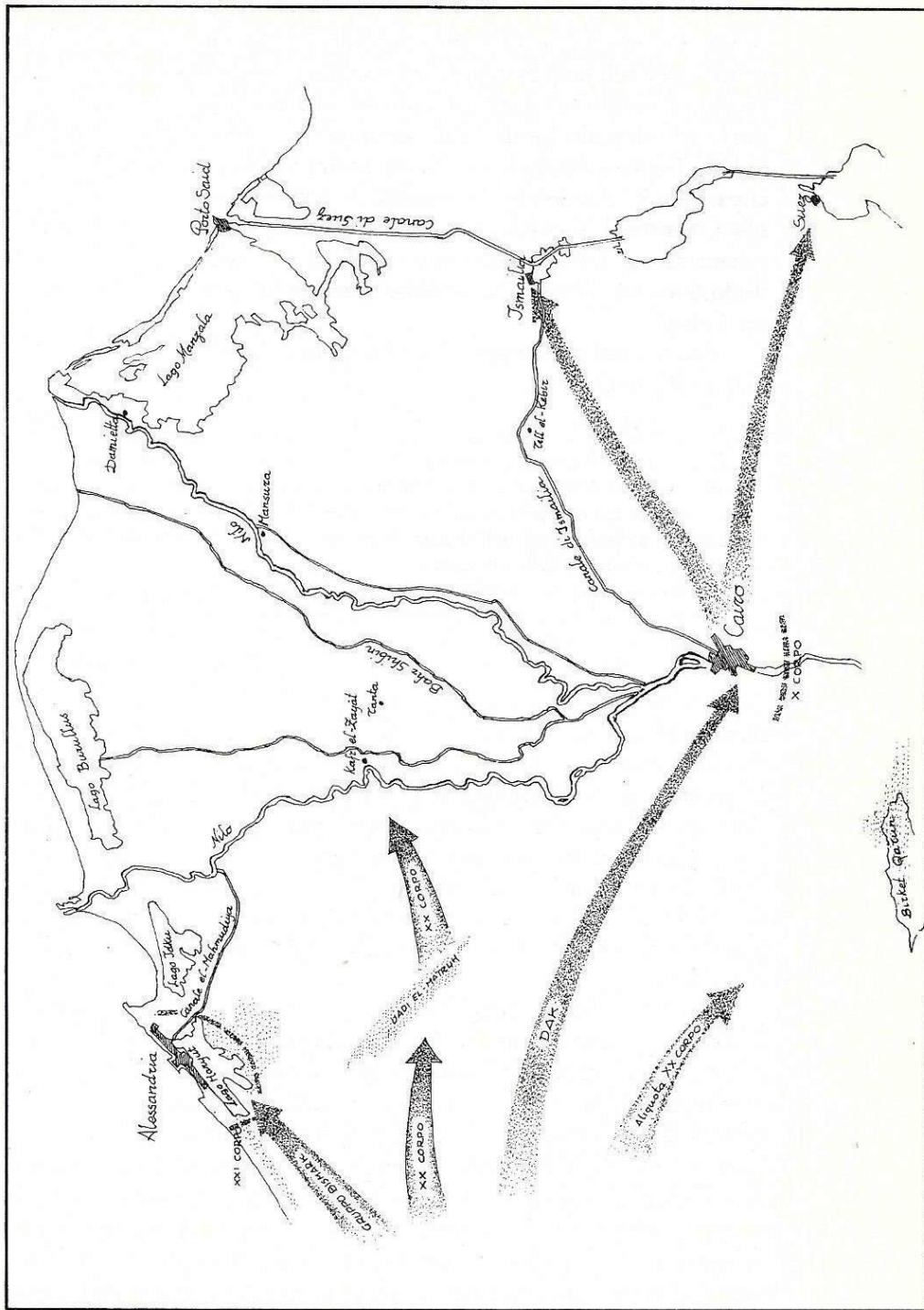
Without going into details, we will say that the August 29 program development of maritime transport in the following data translated. The tanker *Pozarica*, torpedoed in the afternoon of the 20<sup>th</sup>, had been towed in the ports of the Aegean and its load recovered; tankers *Alberto Fajardo* and *Giorgio* arrived serendipitously in Tobruk on the 28<sup>th</sup>, despite repeated airstrikes; *Istria*, *Delphi* and *Camperio* were sunk on 27 and 28; the *Tergesteia* arrived Benghazi the 28<sup>th</sup> (61).

How many hesitations and for how much strength he opposed the prospect of attack, Rommel not overlooked the preparations. Not only, but the 28<sup>th</sup> went so far as to inform commanders of Army Corps the basic lines of successful exploitation, once beat the 8th Army. The AIT would move articulated in three groups of forces on the front row and two in the second (sketch No. 64). Bismarck group, with the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., had to invest and to occupy Alexandria; the DAK with the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and 90<sup>th</sup> Light, had the task to seize the bridges across the Nile at Cairo and occupy the city; between the two, the XX Corps, with

Rommel's plan for the exploitation of success

IL PIANO DI ROMMEL PER LO SFRUTTAMENTO  
DEL SUCCESSO

Schizzo n. 64



*Littorio* and *Ariete* and *Trieste*, was to proceed to the Elimination of British defenses on the *Natrum Wadi*, then occupy the Middle Delta bridges with its mass, sending a detachment to El Fayum to take the airport and local stores. Later, the XXI Corps, with Inf Divs. *Trento* and *Bologna*, was to replace the *Bismarck* in the occupation of Alexandria and make available the two German divisions; While the X Corps, with Inf. Divs. *Brescia*, *Pavia* and *Folgore*, would replace the DAK, Yes to enable him to continue the penetration to Suez and Ismailia, and would have barred the Nile upstream of Cairo <sup>(62)</sup>.

Even on the afternoon of the 29<sup>th</sup> the AIT command told the Comando Supremo:

“The non-arrival of the quantities of fuel and ammunition wondered and insured as a premise, allows only limited operation locally, with the goal of beating the enemy forces deployed on the Alamein positions.

Even this limited operation is possible only because the OBS has placed at the disposal of the army, on loan, to the first 1,000 tons of its fuel stocks.

Precondition for the successful implementation of the abovementioned operation and exploitation of any overwhelming success remains the arrival of supplies required by the communication of the 28<sup>th</sup> (...) to the dates mentioned therein” <sup>(63)</sup>.

But Rommel had already cut the bull's head. On the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup>, falling from the vehicle in which he was sleeping, he saw prof. Horster, the attending physician, and a worried expression told him: “*Professor, the decision to attack today is the most serious I've ever taken. Or the army in Russia manages to advance on Groznye us in Africa to reach the channel or ...*” and made a hand gesture of resigned defeat <sup>(64)</sup>. In the evening he wrote to his wife: “(...) *I accepted the risk, because it won't be long before we have new moon conditions so favorable. On my behalf, I will give all of myself to contribute to success*”.

The tone was firm, although surfacing fatigue and awareness of playing the decisive card in precarious conditions: correlation of forces not full trust (in fact will clearly unfavorable); supplies to the limit of necessity and uncertain because they had to cross the Mediterranean and get to the front; mistrust in the Comando Supremo and the OKW. The premise for the failure were all there.

### 3. THE BATTLE OF ALAM EL HALFA

Despite his pessimism Rommel was put to work as soon as Cavallero departed. The 20<sup>th</sup> in a meeting with Corps commanders and exhibited the design for the upcoming operation: wrap from the enemy deployment with armored forces and attack him on the reverse to destroy it. The happy outcome of the attack was founded essentially on the promptness of movement that should allow to swoop on the the back of the static defenses, disrupt the backline and impose on the 8<sup>th</sup> Army a battle of a overthrown front, which, given the conditions of crisis, would lead to victory despite the opponent having more forces and means.

To ensure surprise turning movement would be accomplished at night, so as to make it difficult to detect and prevent the use of timely ad hoc measures by the English. The first division ranks had to overcome the Italian-German minefield (line A), placed on the Bab el Qattara -Qaret el Khadim-El Taqa alignment, before 22 hours of X day; to reach the starting line on Deir el-Deir Muhafid el-Abd el Mawla Tarfa before next 4 X + 1; start the attack northward to on the 5<sup>th</sup>. Since it was clear that the X day, which is reserved to indicate Rommel with thirty hours in advance, would not be dropped before August 28, since the moving of operating units in the collection had to be completed in four nights from the 25<sup>th</sup>.

When the Corps commanders illustrated the general lines of the operation emerged a significant divisional detail: the understatement of British positions south of Alam Nayil. In the synthesis of the meeting held by De Stefanis the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> reads: "*the success of the predicted night movement is subject to overcoming initial resistance that the enemy will oppose (...). The movement of the Army Corps should result in a normal logistical character, running since it is framed by the 90<sup>th</sup> Light to the North and by the CTA to the South*"<sup>(65)</sup>, and evidently De Stefanis's words reflected the thinking of Rommel.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the AIT command distributed orders of operations with the appreciation of the enemy situation. The 30<sup>th</sup> Corps, believed to be still under the command of Gen. Norrie, seemed in line with the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian and the British 50<sup>th</sup> between the sea and the excluded, Ruweisat with the 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa to the rear of the previous and the remains of the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade in reserve. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, entrusted to Gen. Lumsden it seemed, had the 5<sup>th</sup>

Indian, 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand, the 7<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division. The distributed map attached carefully placed the land features are annotated based on the British charts, aerial photographs, and collections information among Arabs, but left many uncertainties on dislocation of Armor and the Motorized Brigades of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp. For example, apart from a couple of directions by *unbekannt Verband* (unknown unit), was the 1st (rather than 10<sup>th</sup>) for the Armored Division between Ruweisat and Alam el Halfa rather than South of the latter. Basically, apart from the names of the commanders of the Corps, the incorrect attribution of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian to the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps and the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division, the rest was pretty much sticks to reality. Let's see the details:

The 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Div.: had suffered losses and could be considered the best Division of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army;

The English 50<sup>th</sup> Div.: already hard hit, probably two of its brigades had been reconstituted;

The 1<sup>st</sup> South African Div.: reconstituted;

The 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Div.: with two brigades not it's, was of negligible value;

The 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div.: probably a level as the number of tanks and located at the back of the central section of the front, was to consider both towards the Northwest and to the South;

The 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div.: deployed in the southern section of the front, had the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. and another Brigade, which could also be the 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. reconstituted;

Tanks: including infantry and light ones, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army could employ no less than 350-400 wagons.

The 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> were spent by Division commands for plans in collection zone transfer and at the beginning of the offensive.

The 25<sup>th</sup> the AIT Command ordered the preparations for the opening of passages in the friendly minefields.

The 29<sup>th</sup> Rommel held a meeting again. He recalled the absolute need that the armored divisions cross the route during the night and that reach at all costs at dawn the base. Circumstances that could affect the way unfavorable, he said, were three: the *Royal Air Force*, the likely opposed by opposing ground units, limited the cruising speed of the axis columns.

The *Royal Air Force* raids would have been reduced by a mighty axis aviation action on the British, then the output of the Italian-German divisions from the friendly minefield would have been noticed and also hampered, but not prohibitive, especially considering the vastness of the area. Most of the damage was, ultimately, to consider the psychological effects. It was necessary to

strictly avoid that, at the first appearance of a Bengal, troops or motor transport services disperse and the staff go to ground.

As for opposition from the enemy, the reconnaissance had reported the presence of a minefield, traits which would have placed mobile elements of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div.. Well, the mighty Axis mechanized mass *should not linger* from them and the articulation of the divisions into battle groups would allow the immediate intervention of an part of the forces and the eventual ready supply of such intervention. It was also possible that the enemy, put in alarm, be able to bring forward mobile units immediately, trying to counter the advance within a short distance of the reference line A. In this case, the divisions were to be anxious in deploying artillery near the friendly minefield.

The cruising speed, set at *eight* kilometers per hour, did not allow delay. As a result, everything that could affect it-from unexpected failure and not immediately reported to the descent from men during truck stop, a momentary failure of painstaking distances-had to be drastically hampered. These latest recommendations <sup>(66)</sup>.

Among the various measures, those of nature enveloping wing logistics covered paramount importance. Total autonomy was established in:

500 kilometers in fuel, of which 200 in tow, 100 in the divisional bases (El Kharita for the XX Corps, South-West of Abd el Rahman for the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, South of Tell el Aqqaqir for the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*) and 200 in rear bases of El Daba; two days of food and water in tow and an advanced bases; two *unfoc*, an advanced two bases for El Daba.

Of course the facilities to take in tow had to be deployed so as to avoid large losses as a result of concurrent enemy action. Another important topic was the recovery of war booty. Taking into account the possibility that the development of the operation should take place by relying almost exclusively on materials and equipment captured, the priority order was as follows: automobiles, field artillery and its ammunition, pieces from 6 pounds and its ammunition, fuel.

That same afternoon the of the 29<sup>th</sup> the AIT Command communicated by telephone that was established for day X the next day. The 30<sup>th</sup>

Rommel operated a short agenda, ending with the incitement, "*the army, reinforced by new divisions, passes final annihilation today of the enemy. In these decisive days, I expect every soldier of the army gives its utmost.*"

That forces were preparing to enter the field is divided into two distinct blocks: the 21<sup>st</sup> and the X Corps for the frontal action; the XX Corps, the DAK and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light to maneuver. Not participating three Delesee dependent incomplete Italian divisions, i.e. the *Pavia* Inf. Div. (Gen. Nazareno Sadiq), *Pistoia* Inf. Div. (Gen. Joseph Falugi) and *Giovani Fascisti* Arm. Div., (Gen. Ismaele Di Nisio). The first, reduced to two skinny battalions, had been brought to Matruh to reconstitute itself and at the same time provide for coastal defense <sup>(67)</sup>; the second had just begun to flow in Cyrenaica from the motherland, focusing in the area of Agedabia-Gialo <sup>(68)</sup>; the third presided over the oasis of Siwa <sup>(69)</sup>.

| Units of the Italian-German army on 30 August |          |        |         |                     |               |
|---|----------|--------|---------|---------------------|---------------|
| Large units                                   | Inf. Bns | A/T Bn | Eng. Bn | Groups<br>Field Art | Groups<br>A/A |
| X Corp  | 13       | -      | -       | 6                   | -             |
| XX Corp                                       | 6        | 2      | -       | 8                   | 4             |
| XXI Corp                                      | 12       | 1      | 1       | 9                   | -             |
|   | 31       | 3      | 1       | 23                  | 4             |
| DAK   | 6        | 2      | 2       | 6                   | -             |
| 90 <sup>th</sup> Light                        | 6        | 1      | 1       | 1                   | -             |
| 164 <sup>th</sup> Inf. Div.                   | 8        | -      | 1       | 2                   | -             |
| Troops of the Army                            | 4        | 1      | -       | 7                   | 8             |
|   | 24       | 4      | 4       | 16                  | 8             |

Notes:

- a) The XX Corps had 244 medium tanks, 38 Light, 36 semoventi and 32 armored cars.
- b) The DAK averages 203 medium tanks and 41 armored cars. Among army troops there were 12 light tanks. The 90<sup>th</sup> light had 6 armored cars.
- c) The Inf Bn. column also includes Bersaglieri and paratroopers battalions.

More precisely, the XXI Corps were deployed from sea to the El Mreir Ridge including, with the German north <sup>(70)</sup> the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., the *Trento* in the Center and *Bologna* in the south <sup>(71)</sup>. In the back, in reserve, was the German Ewert KG. It was not however a homogeneous subdivision in sectors, as 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. and *Trento* faced the Australian salient of Tell el Eisa with intermingled battalions, while the *Bologna*,

| THE ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE ITALIAN-GERMAN ARMY<br>FOR THE BATTLE OF ALAM EL HALFA |            |
|---|------------|
| Commander: Field Marshal Erwin Rommel<br>Chief of the G.S.: Gen. Alfred Gause     |            |
| X Corps (Gen. Federico Ferrari Orsi) with:  |            |
| <i>Brescia</i> Inf. Div. (Gen. G. Battista Oxilia)                                | 4,300 men  |
| <i>Folgore</i> Inf. Div. (Gen. Enrico Frattini);                                  | 5,200 men  |
| Ramcke Par. Bd. (Gen. Hermann Ramcke)   | 4,000 men  |
| army troops and Services  | 2,300 men  |
| total   | 15,800 men |
| XX Corps (Gen. Giuseppe De Stefanis) with:  |            |
| <i>Ariete</i> Arm. Div. (Gen. Adolfo Infante)                                     | 7,200 men  |
| <i>Littorio</i> Arm. Div.. (Gen. Carlo Ceriana Mayneri)                           | 4,600 men  |
| <i>Trieste</i> Mot. Div. (Gen. Francesco La Ferla);                               | 5,300 men  |
| army troops and services  | 1,500 men  |
| total   | 18,600 men |
| XXI Corps (Gen. Enea Navarini):with   |            |
| <i>Trento</i> Inf. Div. (gen. Francesco Scotti)                                   | 5,200 men  |
| <i>Bologna</i> Inf. Div. (gen. Alessandro Gloria)                                 | 4,800 men  |
| 164 <sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. (col. Carl-Hans Lungershausen)                        | 10,600 men |
| Corps troops and services   | 3,700 men  |
| total   | 24,400 men |
| Deutsche <i>Afrikakorps</i> (Gen. Walther Nehring): with:                         |            |
| 15 <sup>th</sup> <i>Panzer</i> division (Gen. George von Bismarck)                | 12,000 men |
| 21 <sup>st</sup> <i>Panzer</i> division (Gen. Gustav von Vaerst)                  | 11,700 men |
| army troops and Services  | 3,000 men  |
| total   | 26,700 men |
| 90 <sup>th</sup> Light Division (Gen. Ulrich Kleemam)                             | 8,500 men  |
| 104 <sup>th</sup> Artillery command   | 3,500 men  |
| 19 <sup>th</sup> <i>flak</i> Division   | 5,900 men  |
| army troops and services  | 25,000 men |
| <i>Note.</i> The strength of the German units is approximated.                    |            |



reinforced by a battalion of paratroops, the Ramcke Brigade was concentrated in the area of Deir el Shein-El Mreir (sketch No. 65). Here, on stony ground, using pre-existing elements, had been enemy fortification provided a particularly robust locations.

The disposition of the Corps was covered the entire front by a mined field but variable depth continues (by three to four meters in the area of Tell el Eisa at six or seven in the El Mreir). It supported a number of large “pockets”, each surrounded by minefields less deep, separated from nearby from a cornerstone of battalion. Other cornerstones of the battalion were stationed on the lateral and rear of the pockets. The design was based on defensive alternative presented to the enemy: where was directed against a benchmark would find last-ditch; If you had bet against a curtain would meet before the defense of threatened then, once penetrated in the pocket, the elastic resistance of a company deployed therein for that purpose, then the fire of the cornerstones and concentric surrounding of the artillery. Only one section, East of Deir el Dhib, had no pockets and entrusted to a first order for three cornerstones.

The sector of the *Bologna* was organized differently: a checker board of five pillars, variously linked by minefields and exploiting the field and semi-permanent fortifications built by the British at the time.

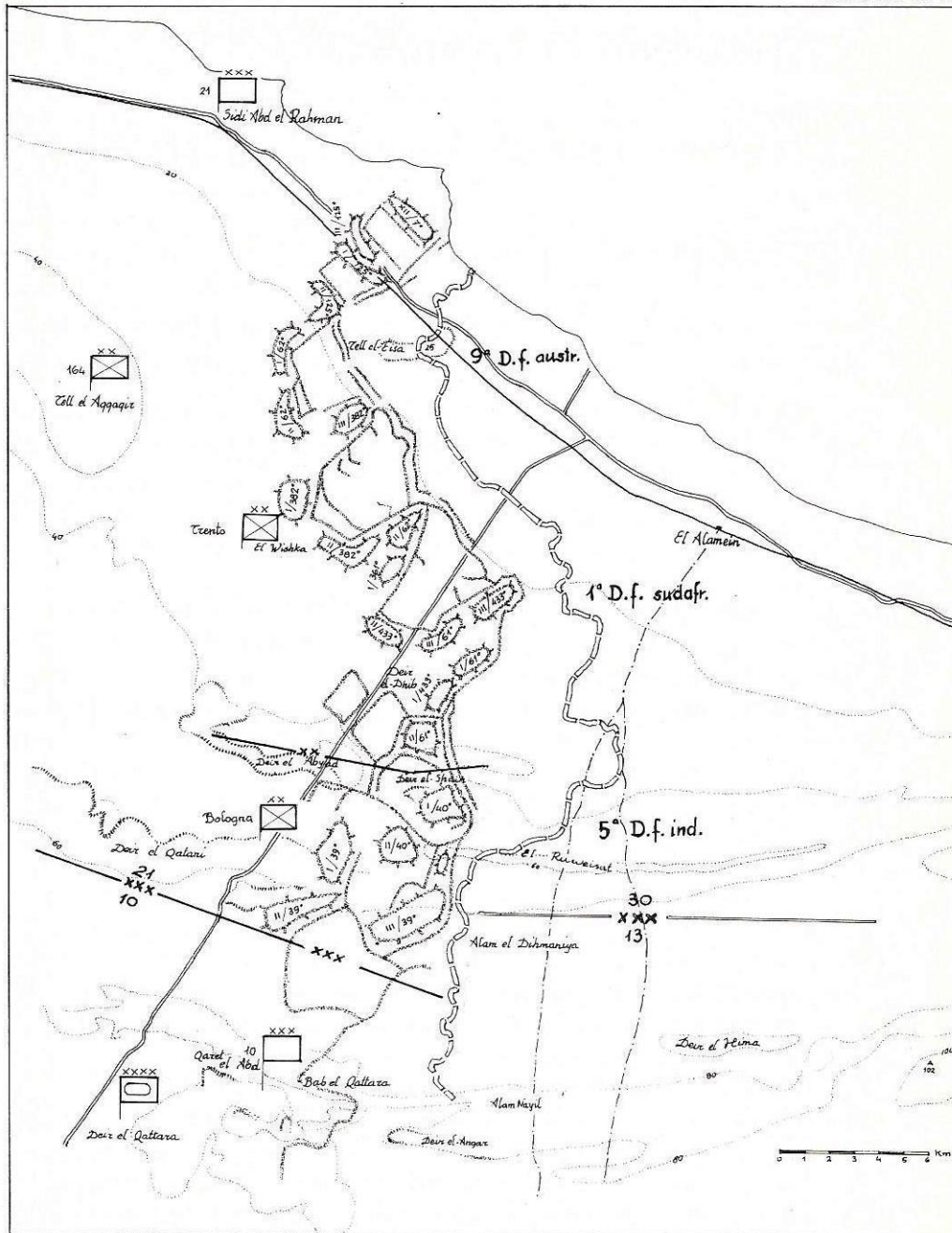
X Corps had in the North the *Brescia*, strongly perched on positions of Qaret el Abd and Bab el Qattara (sketch No. 66). The importance of this part of the front for the purpose of the operation was such that the Division had been reinforced with the 186<sup>th</sup> Infantry (less one battalion) and the 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry of the *Folgore*, and the XXVIII/9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri. Of course the decision was not so much tied to needs of defensive nature with regard to the plan of attack, as we shall see. To the South, the *Folgore* was placed on broad front: two Bersaglieri battalions to East of Jebel Kalakh and two parachute battalions on the El Taqa plateau, while the zone behind Naqb Abu Dweis was under the control of the 4th Parachute Battalion<sup>(72)</sup>. In the sector of the *Folgore* the line was protected by an existing but incompletely mined and not safe enough provided partly by the British post and not yet recognized (reference line A).

Astride the El Alamein-Naqb Abu Dweis track, called Red Track by the AIT and Qattara Track by the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, to the rear of X Corps, had collected a mass of maneuver: the 90<sup>th</sup>, XX Corps, DAK and

The deployment of the XXI Corps at the end of August

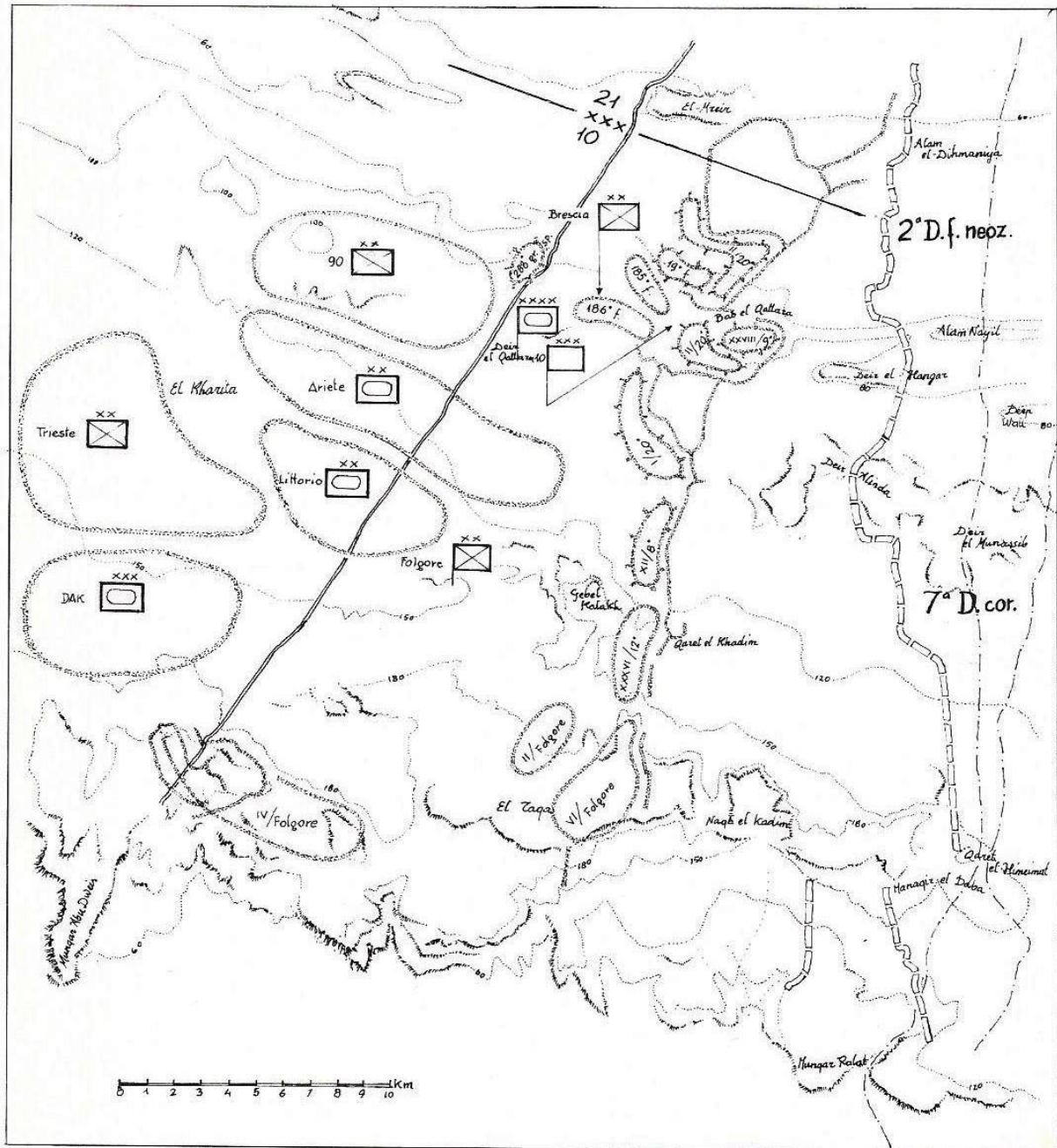
SCHIERAMENTO DEL XXI CORPO A FINE AGOSTO

Schizzo n. 65



SCHIERAMENTO DEL X CORPO A FINE AGOSTO

Schizzo n. 66



a mixed recon regimental group construed from the German 3<sup>rd</sup> 33<sup>rd</sup> and 580<sup>th</sup> Recon Bns. and from recon Bns of the XX Corps (73).

Altogether, under Rommel's direct control were little more than 84,000 Germans and about 44,000 Italians. Employed by Delesee and other 48,600 Italians were scattered everywhere.

As to the R. Aeronautica, the chart below, provides a comprehensive picture of the aircraft of the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet from June to August

|                 | Fighters |     | Bombers |     | Assault |     |
|-----------------|----------|-----|---------|-----|---------|-----|
|                 | Total    | Eff | Total   | Eff | Total   | Eff |
| <i>1 June</i>   |          |     |         |     |         |     |
| East sector     | 197      | 114 | 32      | 18  | 77      | 43  |
| West sector     | 57       | 30  | -       | -   | 19      | 13  |
| <i>1 July</i>   |          |     |         |     |         |     |
| East sector     | 154      | 119 | 28      | 13  | 67      | 48  |
| West sector     | 51       | 28  | -       | -   | 9       | 2   |
| <i>1 August</i> |          |     |         |     |         |     |
| East sector     | 144      | 98  | 7       | 4   | 40      | 27  |
| Center Sector   | 51       | 38  | 18      | 11  | 25      | 18  |
| West sector     | 48       | 41  | -       | -   | 9       | 3   |

Since July Fougier undertook to increase the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet, among other things, moving to Africa the 30<sup>th</sup> Fighter Stormo (23<sup>rd</sup> Group MC. 202, 18<sup>th</sup> Group MC. 200 and 101<sup>st</sup> Group CR.42), but especially taking care of an exceptional measure for both the results promised for both industrial effort, tending to mass-produce ammunition and launch as soon as the sample tested in July 10. It was equipped assault planes already in Africa by a special anti-tank ammunition. The mass (about 130 aircraft) could not be prepared simultaneously, so at the beginning it was necessary to provide for the simultaneous use of all aircraft available in tactical circumstances clearly defined by the presence of large concentrations of tanks and armored cars. Subsequently, became the general provision, the use was to take place on and around the front with ever lower shares.

Organizationally, since 15 July Aeronautica N.A. had divided into three sectors: West, from the Tunisian border to the 19<sup>th</sup> Meridian,

the Center between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> meridians, East after the 25<sup>th</sup> Meridian East. In late August the tactical Command of the East Sector of the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet, implanted at Fuka, have:

30<sup>th</sup> Fighter Stormo with two Groups (MC. 200 and MC. 202);  
 4<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing with two Groups (MC. 202);  
 50<sup>th</sup> Assault Wing with two Groups (CR. 42);  
 8<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group (MC. 200);  
 101<sup>st</sup> Assault Group (CR. 42);  
 91<sup>st</sup> Bombing Squadron (Cant. Z. 1007 bis).

The new *Fliegerfuhrer Afrika*, Gen. Hans Seidemann, had at its disposal four Me. 109 Groups and three of *Stuka*.

In conclusion, the August 29 the relationship between the forces of the AIT and those alleged of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had the following:

BNs. Inf. and Assault: 66 of the Axis against 66 British;  
 Art. Field: 536 pieces against 576;  
 Medium tanks: 447 (of which 244 Italian) against 450;  
 Armored cars: 78 (of which 32 Italian) against 150;  
 Fighter aircraft: 365 (of which 215 Italian) against 600;  
 Bombers and assault: 335 (of which 165 Italian) against 500.

Those overall figures whose meaning is relative. For Rommel was taken by surprise by the armor mass on similar enemy units, sweeping away one after the other. He was already successful and hoped that the British repeated the same mistake.

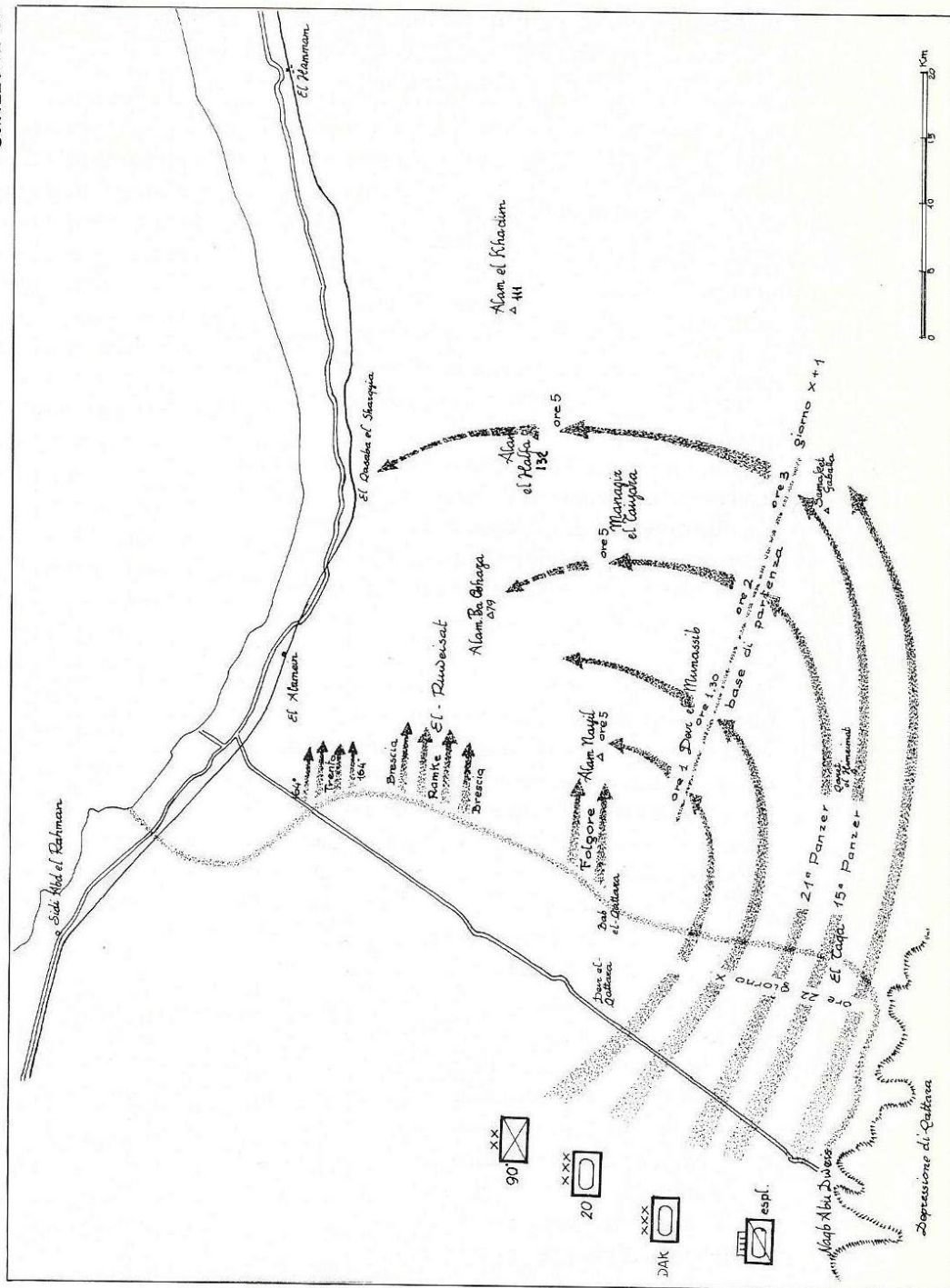
The sketchy maneuver, and initially shown by Rommel to Barbasetti on August 10 (sketch No. 67), foresaw a southerly wrapping *with* the collision on the Alam el Halfa ridge. Of the three frontal attacks by the XXI and the X Corps, the northernmost had plain and simple fixing purposes; the central one was to establish itself on Ruweisat meeting, so to speak, the enveloping mass; the southern one, although minor entity, was of great importance as long as they had to cooperate in the capture of the ridge of Alam Nayil by the 90<sup>th</sup> Light: in other words represented the seam between the static wing and the marching wing of the army. Should no longer repeat the drama of supplies behind the armored divisions!

Then took place some adaptation and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> when the AIT Command issued the operations order, action against the Ruweisat the *Bologna* had taken it too demonstrative character, and the attack in the Alam Nayil was assigned to *Brescia*, reinforced for this purpose, to occupy the dominant positions of Deir el Angar and Deep Well and



INIZIALE DISEGNO DI MANOVRA DI ROMMEL PER  
LA BATTAGLIA DI ALAM EL HALFA  
(10 agosto)

Schizzo n. 67



remove the enemy any chance to maneuver on the left flank of the enveloping movement. Also, the main thing, the basis and objectives of the attack were moved eastward, Yes to allow complete wrapping of the ridge of Alam el Halfa (sketch No. 68).

In late August the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was definitely capable of supporting the latest offensive by Rommel, considered the strengthening and the depth of its static structures, the possession of Alam el Halfa and good qualitative and quantitative availability of armored units (sketch No. 69). The 30<sup>th</sup> Corp (Gen. Ramsden), deployed between the sea and the Ruweisat, aligned the Australian 9th (Gen. Morshead), 1<sup>st</sup> South African (Gen. Pienaar) and the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian (Gen. Briggs). His task was defined so as to leave no doubts: to resist to the bitter end, where positions and where attacked. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corp (Gen. Horrocks) had, however, a much more complex task, that even as to its correct implementation depend on the good outcome of the entire defensive plan. Its two infantry divisions, the 2nd New Zealand (Gen. Freyberg) and the British 44th (Gen. Hughes), were to ensure the secure possession of Alam Nayil and Alam el Halfa. The first was the juncture between static defense and mobile defense and, at the same time, the Western bastion of the stop line against the German-Italian. The second was the Eastern bastion of that stop line and along the pivot for maneuver for the dynamic reaction. Between the two there was a gap of a dozen kilometers: it would have been closed by armored units or it would have been the ground of action for them.

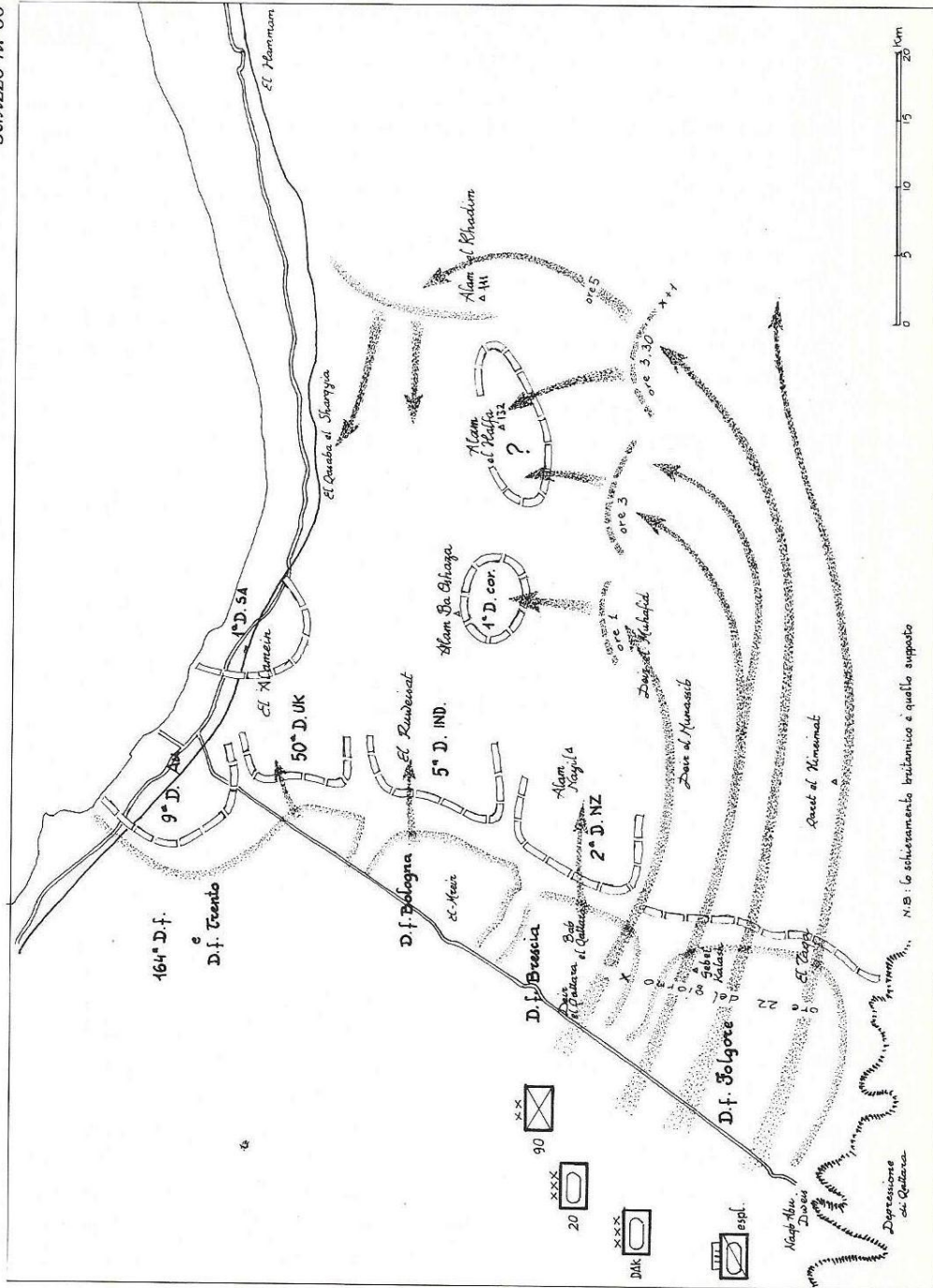
In essence, Montgomery had implemented an immense entrenched field, the perimeter rested on the following key positions: Tell el Eisa-Ruweisat -Alam Nayil-Alam el Halfa, and then moved towards the coast with minefields, and strongpoints. Inside, the strongpoints required by the 26th Australian Brigade and Qasaba area el Sharqya and the 5th Indian Brigade on the Eastern fringes from gave depth to Ruweisat.

The commitment of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp was especially important in the initial phase of the battle, as long as they had to slow down the execution of Rommel, also allowing the effective intervention of the *Royal Air Force* on the Axis columns, and start the attrition of the Italian-German forces. In this framework, the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. (Gen. Renton) had deployed on wide front the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. to the right, namely South of Alam Nayil, and the 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. slight left, until the Qattara depression. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. of the Division was assigned to it the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm Div. (Gen. GateHouse), arrived on the battlefield with the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd, whose role as

The final maneuver Rommel for battle of Alam el Halfa (August 22)

IL DISEGNO DI MANOVRA DEFINITIVO DI ROMMEL  
PER LA BATTAGLIA DI ALAM EL HALFA  
(22 agosto)

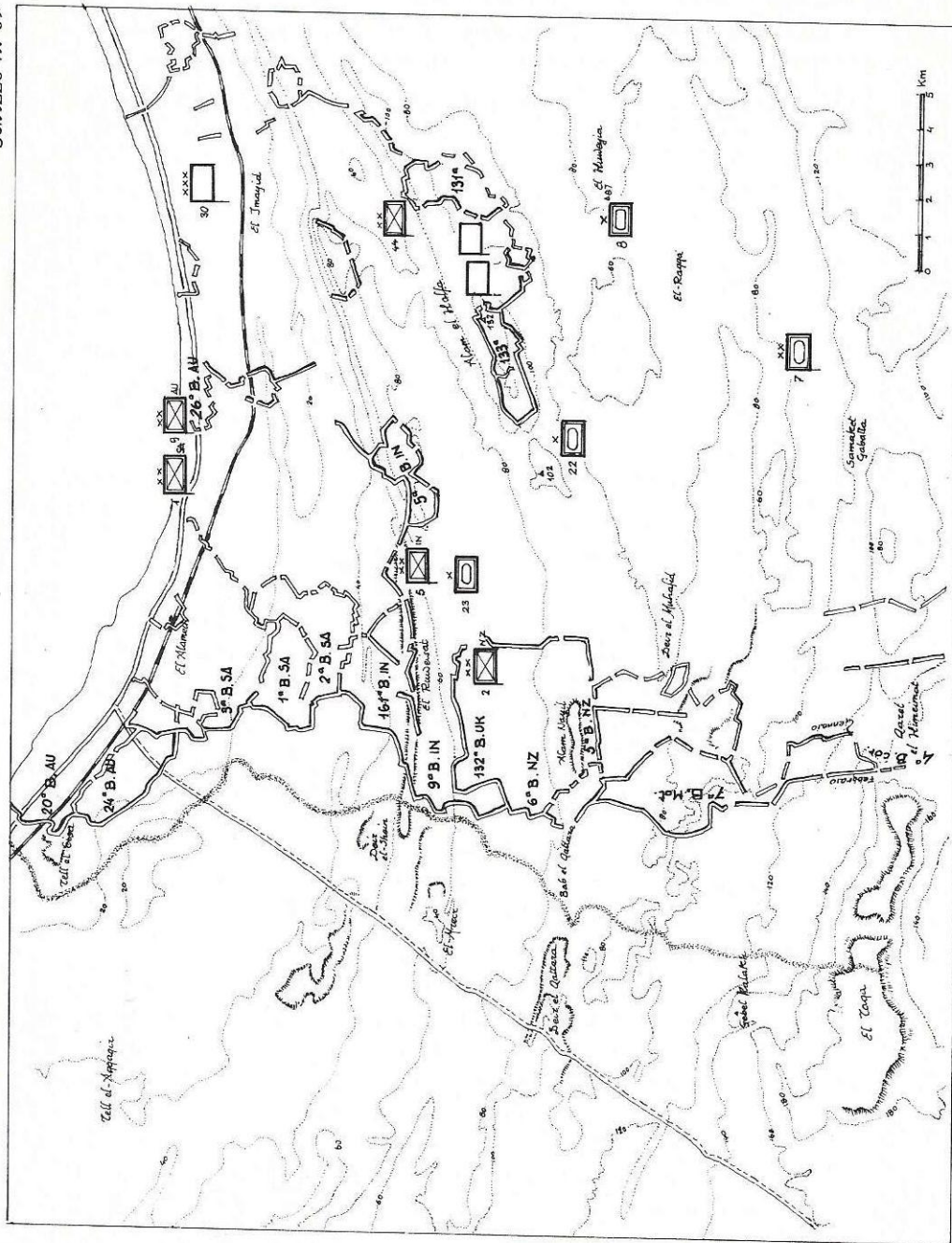
Schizzo n. 68





## LO SCHIERAMENTO DELL'8 ARMATA A FINE AGOSTO

Schizzo n. 69



THE ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE BRITISH  
8<sup>th</sup> ARMY BATTLE OF ALAM EL HALFA

Commander: Gen. Bernard I. Montgomery

Chief G.S.: Gen. Francis de Guingand

13<sup>th</sup> Army Corps (Gen. Brian g. Horrocks) with:

2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div. (Gen. D.f. Bernard C. Freyberg):

5<sup>th</sup> Brigade (Gen. H.k. Kippenberger);

6<sup>th</sup> Brigade (Gen. G.h. Clifton);

132<sup>nd</sup> Brigade (Gen. C.B. Robertson);

Divisional units.

44<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. (Gen. J. T. P. Hughes):

131<sup>st</sup> Brigade (Gen. E.H.C. Frith);

133<sup>rd</sup> Brigade (Gen. A. W. Lee);

Divisional units.

7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. (Gen. J.M.L. Renton):

4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. (Gen. W.G. Carr);

7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. (Gen. T.J.B. Bosvile);

Divisional units.

10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. (Gen. Alec H. Gatehouse):

8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. (Gen. N. Custance);

22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. (Gen. G. P.B. Roberts);

Divisional units.

Army and Corps Troops

30<sup>th</sup> Army Corps (Gen. W.H.C. Ramsden) with:

1<sup>st</sup> South African Inf. Div. (Gen. Dan H. Pienaar);

1<sup>st</sup> Brigade (Gen. C.L. de W. du Tiot);

2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade (Gen. W.H.E. Poole);

3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade (Gen. R.J. Palmer);

Divisional units.

5<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Div. (Gen. H.R. Brigg):

5<sup>th</sup> Brigade (gen. D. Russell);

9<sup>th</sup> brigade;

161<sup>st</sup> Brigade (Gen. F.E.C. Hughes);

Divisional units.

|  |
|--|
| <p>9<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Div. (Gen. Leslie J. Morshead):<br/> 20<sup>th</sup> Brigade (Gen. W. J. V. Windeyer);<br/> 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade (Gen. A. L. Godfrey);<br/> 161<sup>st</sup> Brigade (Gen. R. W. Tovell);<br/> Divisional units.<br/> 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd. (Gen. G. W. Richards).</p> <p>Troops and services of the army Corps.</p> <p>Troops and services of the Army.</p>   |
| <p>ORGANIZATION OF THE BRITISH ARMORED DIVISION IN THE M.E.<br/> established on August 24, 1942</p>  |
| <p>Division command (with 8 tanks and 2 anti -tank)<br/> one Regt. armored cars (with 64 armored cars)</p> <p>Armored brigade command (with 10 tanks):<br/> three Regt. tanks (with 85 tanks, 8 anti -tank<br/> and 6 support tanks)<br/> one motorized Bn.</p> <p>Motorized Brigade command with:<br/> three motorized inf. Bns.</p> <p>Divisional artillery command with:<br/> three Field Regt. (with 25 lb pieces.)<br/> one anti-tank Regt. (with 6 lb pieces.)<br/> one Regt. anti-aircraft (with 40 mm. pieces)</p> <p>Divisional engineering command with:<br/> two squadrons of engineers<br/> one field Park Squadron</p> <p>Divisional services</p> |

Corps reserve was fundamental: the brigades were to be held ready to square off for combat in areas where they were (the 22<sup>nd</sup> on the southwestern fringes of Alam el Halfa and the 8<sup>th</sup> to the South) or to launch a counterattack; the other hypothesis envisaged the possibility of intervention of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd. The action of the 7th Arm. Div. relied much on large minefields, *January* and *February*, lying between Alam Nayil and the Qattara depression. *February* was the field most advanced and at it were lurking the two brigades of Renton, but light units acted in no man's land, so as to make as soon as possible contact with the Italian-German avant-garde.

According to the British information service, the AIT had some 82,000 men, of which half Germans. Of this mass, 25,000 Germans with 230 *Panzer* and were 17,000 Italians with 200 M 14 tanks involved in maneuvering. Of course they were considered the only efficient means, however the Italian tanks were considered a little threat.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Army had 935 tanks, of which 713 efficient and on the battlefield<sup>(74)</sup>. Wanting to make a comparison between the types of tanks actually available in the two Armies on 30 August, you might see the following reports:

164 *Grant* against 110 Pzkw III SP., Pzkw IV and IV Sp.;

370 *Valentine* and *Crusader* against 93 Pzkw III;

179 *Stuart* against 12 Pzkw II and 244 M 14 tanks.

Since 24 August the British awaited the start of the offensive.

A message arrived that day, at 13:17, to the broadcasts center of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp and intercepted by AIT, provided:

“By 23:59 this evening all units of 30<sup>th</sup> Corps are ready to go into action (...) Alarm condition every morning from 05:45 to 06:15 and every evening from 19:45 to 20:15 (...) No permission or licenses”.

Every day that passed, therefore, the tension increased. The 30<sup>th</sup> the *Royal Air Force* reported large concentrations of German-Italian troops in the southern sector of the front.

To overcome the space between the Bab el Qattara - Jebel Kalakh - El Taqa alignment and departure bases, arranged by time Rommel had given three hours to the 90<sup>th</sup> Light make about thirty kilometers, five hours for XX Corp for about fifty kilometers, five and a half hours to the DAK for sixty.

It is not he who does not see the exaggerated appreciation of convenience about the speed of progression on varied and not known terrain, with the certainty of having to cross minefields, location, depth and extension density unknown, and with equal security of a dynamic contrast of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. The thing is very strange, especially in relation to delays and unexpected maneuver to Ain el Gazala, who could not be forgotten.

At 19:30 of the 30<sup>th</sup> the armored columns vanguards began moving. On the other side, the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. had the II battalion of the *Rifle Brigade* in contact with New Zealanders, the 2<sup>nd</sup> *King's Royal Rifle Corps* in Deir Alinda (i.e. the direction of advance of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light), the 10<sup>th</sup> *Hussars* with 42 *Crusaders* just South and then the 9<sup>th</sup> *King's Royal Rifle Corps*. The 7<sup>th</sup> *Rifle Brigade* was held in reserve. The 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. light had different units: the 1st Battalion, *King's Royal Rifle Corps* in Qaret el Himeimat area the 11<sup>th</sup> *Hussars* and 12<sup>th</sup> *Lancers* each with 54 armored cars and the 4<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> *Hussars* with 50 *Stuart* South of Himeimat. To the rear, the 3<sup>rd</sup> *County of London Yeomanry* with 27 *Crusader*. In this area had to pass the XX Corps, the DAK and the Recon KG.

### 31 AUGUST

The advance of the Italian and German divisions took place in a completely different atmosphere from what had been imagined. Not only was much slower than expected, but the first resistance took place at a minefield that was not even suspected. The broken terrain allowed good game to British patrols, which, made aware of the break-in, withdrew to their own minefields but without excessive haste. The initial hurdle was, of course, *February*. Was deep and well placed and also well defended by machine guns and artillery, which is why the setback was clear.

The 90<sup>th</sup> Light began a determined work of detection and removal of mines South of Deir Alinda, but for some time it remained almost pinned by the fire of the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. and the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Horse Artillery. Even the *Panzer* support provided by some infantry allowed a passage.

The XX corps advanced on two divisional columns (the *Ariete* on the left and the *Littorio* on the right), with the *Trieste* in the second array divided into two parts. Followed the front echelon. The armored divisions were divided

into three Battlegroups, each with a medium tank battalion, one semoventi unit, one motorized and one of Bersaglieri truck carried; the Motorized Division was divided into two groupings centered on a regiment each<sup>(75)</sup>.

The snag with *February* was deadly. Shortly after midnight, less than 10 kilometers over the reference line, the vanguards were arrested by a mined strip preceded by scattered mines, on which various vehicles and tanks had exploded. Started the opening of corridors under intense fire and noise, only to interdiction 04:30 the *Littorio*, first, managed to overcome the minefield and three quarters of an hour later, when the bulk of the columns was drawn in the passages, found himself before *January*. The situation had become very difficult. The *Ariete* had suffered serious losses in engineers because unfortunately had been caught in a sling; so at this point on Gen. Infante decided to stop just west of *January*, waiting to use the passages from the *Littorio*. This set immediately to the new effort, although the work was unlikely because of the shooting of British batteries.

Even the DAK was in crisis. Its avant-garde made contact with *February* more to the South; they first attacked the defenses, but instead of a light resistance by patrols or isolated units, found a unsuspected strong reaction. This while he was alive the *Desert Air Force*. The magnesium flares lit to day the area in which the axis armored and motorized columns made their way with difficulty and the bombing sowed confusion and loss. At 03:00 Nehring communicated to Rommel his inability to bring about the objectives assigned him soon or immediately. And since in war misfortunes never come alone, shortly after Bismarck was killed by a landmine and Nehring seriously injured by a English bomber.

The dawn of August 31 saw the entire mass of maneuver tethered in the midst of two major minefields; with errors of direction of movement (the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* had slanted toward the South hampering progression of the Recon KG); with two commanders of DAK, the spearhead, of three out of combat; in a situation whose difficulties were natural so well cultivated by the *Desert Air Force* to produce an alarming level of confusion.

Rommel was strongly disappointed. He had expected to have to resort to actual operations forcing the minefields. At 02:45 had urged the columns: "*Advance so far too slow. Only swift and ensures successful breakout*". At 06:00 he ordered XX Corps to deploy all the artillery and throw themselves forward, given that the

90<sup>th</sup> Light and the DAK, at the sides were attacking *January*. Was brief illusion and at 07:10 was forced to have the units a halt west of *January*.

“My advance design 50 kilometers to the East with the motorized units still in the moon-night - Rommel admitted ruefully -and resume at dawn the attack northward failed. The attacking units were too long withheld from strong barriers hitherto *unknown*”<sup>(76)</sup>.

Now Rommel wondered seriously if not convenisse renounce the offensive, since the surprise had faded and that now it was necessary to deal with the British reaction. Established to decide after considering the situation of DAK. Here he found Col. Bayerlein, Chief of the G.S, who had assumed temporary leadership of the *Afrikakorps* and continued in forcing *January*. Bayerlein explained that the passage of minefields was obtained and it was worth it to persevere in the effort. In fact the *Afrikakorps* had arrived at dawn beyond the second obstacle. The 21st *Panzer*, which had fallen the most of night bombing, had encountered a passage in *January*, then the solution of his problem was. The 15th *Panzer*, instead, had to toil somewhat, even to dislodge the enemy from Qaret el Himeimat. However, if the avant-garde had managed to establish a secure bridgehead, thanks to the withdraw of the 4<sup>th</sup> light Armored Brigade, the passages were still a bottleneck and therefore a cause of significant slowdown of the advance. This was also to add the already strong fuel consumption.

Rommel agreed with the proposals of Bayerlein, probably without too much conviction: he had indeed resign themselves to change the initial plan. No more turning of Alam el Halfa. For a while, it was necessary to head north soon after overcoming *January* and reordered and restocked the units.

“we considered - remembered-if it weren't Bayerlein should stop the battle, since the British knew perfectly well where we were and what our intentions were. Rommel discussed the situation with me and reached the decision to continue the offensive. However, it imposed a variation; outreach action and the subsequent encirclement of the 8th Army were no longer feasible, since the enemy had too much time to prepare for a counter-offensive action. The surprise attack had failed! Among other things there was possible, in broad daylight, pass to the armed heights of Alam El Halfa. The enemy imposed therefore the other solution, which meant that we had to fulfill first the intended conversion to the North and we had to then go on the heights of Alam El Halfa and in particular on the important "hill 132" that needed to be taken with a direct action”<sup>(77)</sup>.

The new goal of the DAK was now Alam el Halfa; the XX Corps would have occupied hill 102, at the southern end of the Ridge, and preserved the goal of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light of Deir Hima. Meanwhile II/185<sup>th</sup> paratroopers of the *Folgore* was moved to Qaret el Himeimat for possession (sketch No. 70).

On this variant arose later discussions, essentially based on the assertion by some British sources, determining weight caused by the famous rigged topographic map abandoned in no man's land, which was mentioned earlier. The map, which aimed to divert Rommel “*by a large turning movement around the ridge of Alam el Halfa, going Northeast, our communications with Alexandria*”, showed “*a very awkward area to the road barrier that we wanted the enemy to take and excellent zone ahead and up to the ridge of Alam el Halfa and beyond along this Ridge, reaching the Railway*”<sup>(78)</sup>. More precisely, the area south of hill 132 of Alam el Halfa, characterized by very soft sand and then low practicability, was indicated as easy transit; by contrast a section South of hill 111 of Alam el Khadim was falsely presented as very bumpy under a veil of soft sand. In essence: a deterrence in the direction to El Hammam passing through Alam el Khadim, which concerned the right of the DAK, and an invitation on the director Agram Deir el-Alam el Halfa, which had affected the left side of the DAK. However, at least the invitation there was no need because the ground South of Alam el Halfa on the map used by the AIT was already defined *Easy stony ground* (stony ground smooth) and *Steiniger Boden* (stony ground).

Von Mellenthin was explicit: “*I can confirm that that the map was considered authentic and served the purpose of putting the Afrikakorps astray*”, clearly referring to the soft sand encountered by DAK in his attack on Alam el Halfa and further loss of time and more fuel consumption<sup>(79)</sup>. However, the specific role of the map seems to have been insignificant.

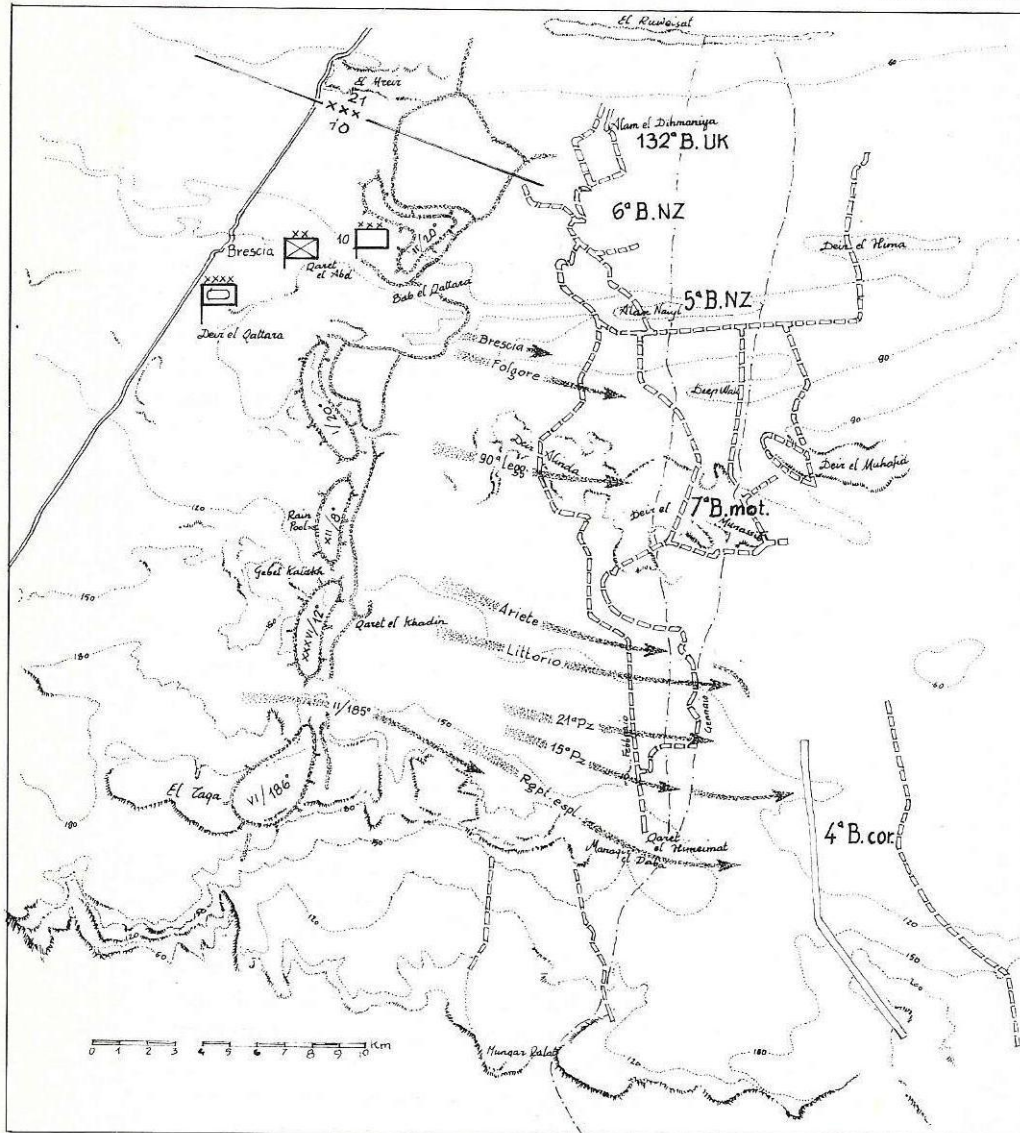
At 08:30 Rommel met with De Stefanis, inform on the situation (for about an hour the *Littorio* was going through *January*) and ordered to pass even the *Ariete* and *Trieste* for the breach opened by the *Littorio*. At 12:00 the XX Corp was to resume, at the same time the DAK, to rush to the Northeast.

Even in the British camp everything worked as desired. More or less, the Italian-German effort had been evaluated correctly and, at dawn, the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp hoped that the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. was able to retain the thrust at the minefields. However the German penetration in the field of Himeimat and



LA SITUAZIONE ALLE ORE 8 DEL 31 AGOSTO

Schizzo n. 70



particularly the infiltration of the Recon KG did pull the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Arm. Bd. and, therefore, the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. creating the impression of risk of the trapped and surrounded among the minefields. Because Gen. Bosville decided to collect the Brigade to the East of Deir el Ragil, where was the VII Battalion of the *Rifle Brigade*.

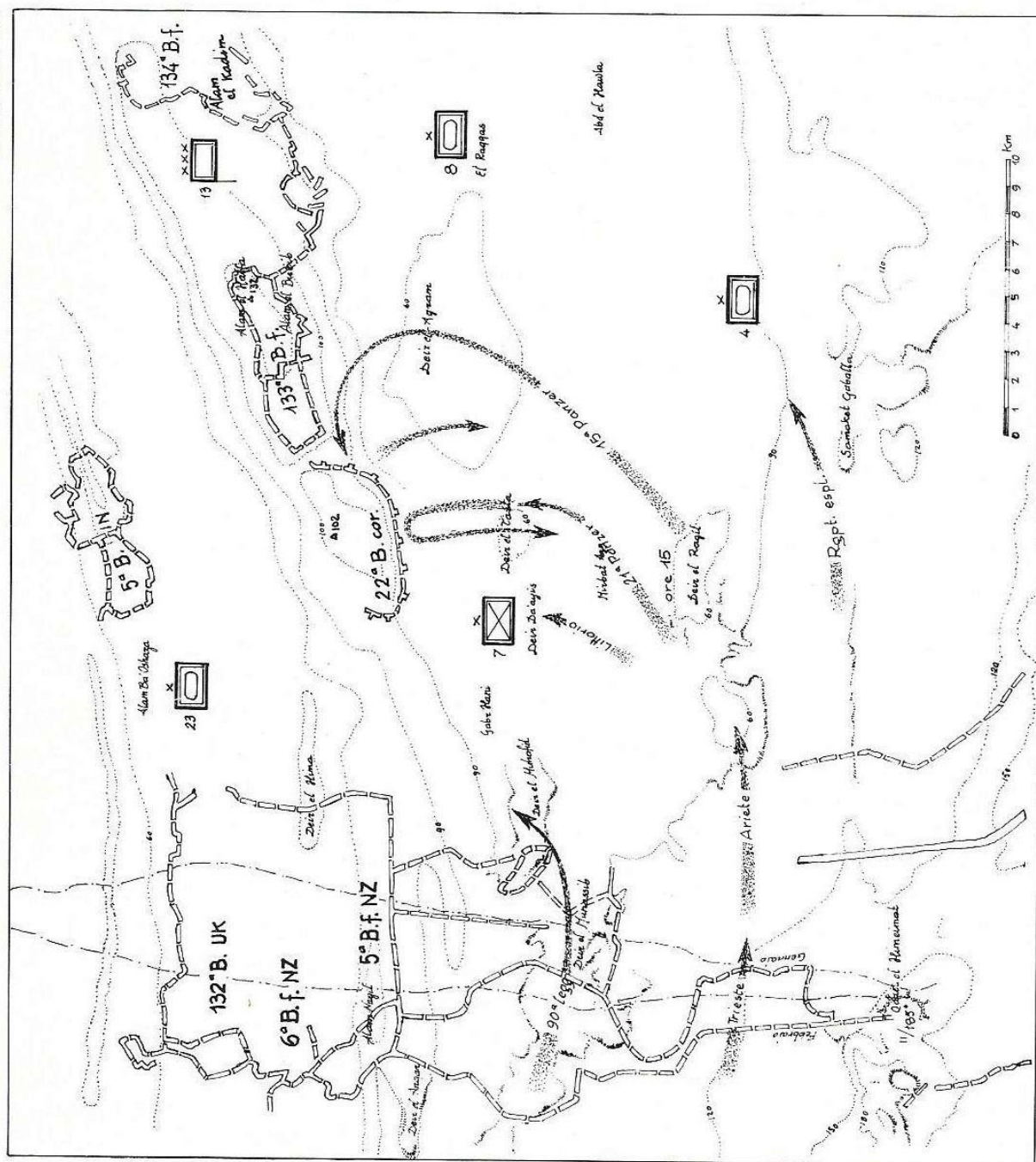
Gen. Horrocks was aware of this morning's advance and immediately ordered Renton, as orders to the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. was to block the enemy if possible on *February*, otherwise on *January* and, at worst, to oppose an act of attrition and of retardation. To make more tangible remarked, Horrocks commanded Renton to postpone the advance of the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. The 10<sup>th</sup> Hussars was to come back to the axis columns: around noon took position on the northern edge of Deir el Muhafid, by being in contact with the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Cavalry, which was located in the area of Deep Well.

The DAK, whose command was taken by Gen. von Vaerst, completed supplies at 13:00 and shortly after you put in motion towards the Northeast. The sandstorm started at 11:00 was raging but, if on one hand put in trouble men and means, on the other hand facilitated preventing the to aviation to rage. In addition to units of the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Arm. Bd., who had already faced the advance and that continued to oppose a elastic resistance, joined the 3<sup>rd</sup> *County of London Yeomanry* with 27 *Crusader*. In short, at 15:00 the DAK had just passed the starting point that, according to the initial draft, was supposed to reach at 03:30.

There was still some light now, so the Germans continued (sketch No. 71). To the 21st *Panzer* was going left, commanded now by Col. Lungershausen, which in turn ceded the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. to Col. Hecker, Commander of the Army's engineers; to the right the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* under the command of Gen. von Randow, which, after a back injury, was hitherto available; Southeast moved the Recon KG, in the late morning to Samaket Gaballa.

Does not seem to have been identified neither the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., arranged in a semicircle around hill 102 (the goal of XX Corps), nor, even less, the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. of Roberts had four regiments, each on two *Grant* squadrons or *Crusader* and *Stuart*, totaling 92 *Grant*, 34 *Crusader* and 40 *Stuart*. There were also about 25 field pieces 18 pounds of horse artillery and 12 pieces 6 pounder. The 8th Arm. Bd. had three regiments and going forth on line 72 *Grant* and 12 *Crusader*.

Schizzo n. 71



In the afternoon, Richards pushed southward squadrons of *Stuart*, Yes to gather news on the enemy without engaging with him. Around 16:30 was spotted the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and one hour later the advanced elements of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. established the fire with the Germans, and then withdrew. At 18:00 Lungershausen opened the formation moving to attack hill 102. The action was violent and initially appeared to turn in favor of the Germans for the top range of their guns, but closing the distances, the counterattack of the *Scots Greys* and the fire of the British artillery eventually suppress the impact. The 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* to disengaged and moved to Deir el Ragil profiting in the shadows of evening.

The 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* had started a movement to unseat the left of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. and also in contention, however, exposing himself to the barrage of the English 133<sup>rd</sup> Inf. Bd perched at Alam el Halfa, however, as the sunset, was unable to implement the plan and attempt to turn. The 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. lamented the loss of 19 tanks, the Germans more or less the same.

To the Southeast, beyond Samaket, Gaballa the Recon KG had stopped all day object of particular attention by the *Desert Air Force* and severely damaged vehicles and armored vehicles.

Of course, even DAK operation had been very slow. The approximately 25 kilometers from the area which run southwest of Deir el Ragil to hill 102 were in three and a half hours: too, given the absence of enemy opposition and attacks, and just a little explained with Khamsin and the crossing of Deir el Ragil. Rommel wrote that "*towards 16:00 our attack against hill 132 [Alam el Halfa] suspended*", but this version does not agree with the British sources and, moreover, was at 19:15 the XX Corps received orders to move to the defense on horizon and move to make connection with the 90<sup>th</sup> Light on the left the and DAK to the right. According to Rommel the reason of failure should be sought in heavy fuel consumption caused by practicability difficult terrain and the slow speed of the tanks on the soft sand, but not simply in them: a large part of the blame should be attributed to ... the XX Italian Corps, whose slowness had prevented a more harmonious operation.

It is also necessary to make a clarification here. According to Rommel assigned goals were "*Hill 132 for DAK and Alam-Bueib Alam El Halfa for the Italian XX Corps.*" Given that the aim is to De Stefanis quite improperly, given that the remark has two dimensions,

hill 132 of Alam el Halfa and hill 120 of Alam el Bueib, the fact is that the XX Corp historical diary relates something very different:

8:30 p.m. “Marshal Rommel, meeting with the Ecc. De Stefanis near the *Ariete* Division and updated on the situation, orders the Corp tile to the left of the *Littorio* Division *Ariete* Division and attack at 12:00 with the direction of attack the positions on Hill 102 positions (5 km. Northwest of Manaqir el Taiyara”.

As for the message at 08:15 transmitted by the AIT, reads:

“CTA attacks 12 a.m. toward zone 473 right 10- 457 left 12. The XX Corps contributes to turning left attack of the CTA”,

and at 10:15 was followed by the following: “*Attack at 13:00. CTA to the right. XX ACorps left. Contact line: 471 right 13- 152 right 45*”. Would be to assume a change in the assignment of goals made by Rommel after the interview with De Stefanis and misinterpretation of references by the XX Corps, which seems rather unlikely.

In addition, you can admit that a concentrated effort of the XX Corps and the DAK against hill 120 - hill 132 would appear more logical, but in practical terms it would be seen arriving on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. from the West and the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. from the East. Anyway the DAK was launched on a target of attack other than prescribed: hill 102, instead of hill 132 of Alam el Halfa.

Unfortunately the XX Corps had undergone significant ups and downs just departing. The means of *Ariete* began passing through *January* at 11:00, taking formation for one. The resulting excessive depth of the column and the inevitable traffic jams caused only at 17:00 the entire Division was over the minefield. Meanwhile De Stefanis did continue with the *Littorio*, which passed a third minefield soon detected as fake, had brought to the East of Deir el Muhafid. When the order came from Rommel to stop, the *Ariete* had attested at the mock minefield and the *Trieste* was with the bulk of the forces immediately west of *February*. The Corps's losses amounted to 46 among dead and wounded, two medium tanks out of action and 14 damaged, 10 light tanks and two semoventi damaged and 15 vehicles destroyed. The *Littorio* even had 92 medium tanks, to *Ariete's* 120 and the *Trieste* 17.

On the left, the 90<sup>th</sup> Light had reached northern edge of Deir el Muhafid, that is pretty much the goal.

We must now mention the outcome of efforts made by the X and XXI Corps. The most important action was organized by the *Brescia*. There were eight battalions: left column consisting of the I and II/19<sup>th</sup> Inf., XXVIII/9<sup>th</sup> Bers., V/186<sup>th</sup> Para. and supported by II/185<sup>th</sup> Art. the *Folgore* had to point South of Deir Angar; right column consisting of the IX and X/187<sup>th</sup> Para. and two German paratroopers battalions and supported by III/185<sup>th</sup> Art. the *Folgore* had to head north of Deir Alinda. The area which was to be launched the attack seemed to be under the responsibility of Gen. Freyberg, who was quick to resume the command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand soon healed from injury reported during the battle for Tobruk. The front was held by the English 132<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd., belonging to the 44th Inf. Div. but temporarily assigned to Freyberg, and 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Inf. Bd. deployed between Ruweisat and Alam Nayil. Here was established the 5<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. and this was the mainstay of the sector, although eccentric. More to the rear, North of Deep Well, was located the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Cavalry equipped with armored cars and *Stuart*. In reserve one squadron of the 46<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* with thirteen *Valentine* and two *Matilda*, reinforced by some smaller units. It was a completed deployment between 28 and 30 August, just arrived of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd. had made available the 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Inf. Bd. to strengthen the southern flank of static defenses.

The task entrusted to Freyberg was straightforward: stay in place even if passed and bypassed by Rommel's maneuver. A lot of security, in fact, derived from the consideration that the enemy would be forced to cross depressions of Alinda, Muhafid, Ragil Munassib and difficult navigation and optimum targets for air strikes.

That said, it remains to explain the action of the two columns of *Brescia*. The goal to be achieved was indicated since August 20. Only thought to incurring a considerable struggle, considering the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade in defense of Alam Nayil and 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade to barrage of the affected area. Since instead, as we know, Freyberg's troops did not have any responsibility to the South of Alam Nayil, two parallel efforts they slipped along the southern edge of the *box* leaving completely indifferent the New Zealanders, with the exception of the artillery<sup>(80)</sup>. They encountered the II Battalion of the *Rifle Brigade* and II of the *King's Royal Rifle Corps*, but it was not difficult to occupy the edges of Deir el Angar (19<sup>th</sup> Infantry) and Deir Alinda (187<sup>th</sup> Paratroopers) as scheduled.

In the sector of XXI Corp, the *Bologna* against Ruweisat, the *Trento*



the sector of el Miteiriya Sanyet and the German 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. more Northward made the planned patrols activities: some loss, some prisoners, but you can't just talk about "fixing". The enemy returned the visits by patrols with similar results.

On the evening of the 31<sup>st</sup> Rommel wanted to rally the forces. Not only realize that hopes for success decreased at sight, but increasingly worried for the fuel situation in the rear and began to take the reaction of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. Late in the evening, therefore, ordered to orient to face enemy counterattacks during the next day: "*So skillfully deploying artillery. Bury everything, decentralize trailers*" stated to the 90<sup>th</sup> Light and to XX Corp. For DAK, however, thought a recurrence of the stress.

On the other side of the Hill, Alexander and Montgomery had followed very closely the development of events. While being determined to bring 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. to the battlefield, moving from East of Cairo West of the Delta, Montgomery led the policy for September 1<sup>st</sup>. The *Desert Air Force*, which included three fighter squadrons of the 9<sup>th</sup> U.S. Air Force, had to perform heavy shelling on DAK, who was expected to spend the night parked in areas of Deir el Ragil, as well as on the airstrips of El Daba and Sidi Haneish, East of Matruh. The 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div. and 44th Inf. Div. was confirmed as British the balance held by the respective positions; the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., which had been added the 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd., it was keep hill 102, preventing the Germans from producing an anti-tank deployment between 5<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. and avoid that individual brigades were defeated separately. Finally, the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. mistakenly believed the owner of Gaballa Samaket, was tasked to act against the axis supply routes.

## 1<sup>st</sup> SEPTEMBER

Dawn found the DAK a bit shaken because the *Desert Air Force* had raged throughout the night, hitting and torching parked vehicles and moving and small stores. The difficulties experienced by supply columns had much repercussions on the progress of the battle by inducing Rommel to decide

"already on the morning of 1 September, to abstain form more moment, because operations were to be avoided grand maneuvers with the motorized units. At most we could afford some local attacks".<sup>(81)</sup>

According to von Mellenthin, delay more than a real interruption of supplies led the DAK to a difficult situation for both themselves and for the whole operation:

“On the morning of 1 September gasoline shortages by Rommel was such that he was forced to limit the attack on Alam el Halfa to the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzerdivision*. It was clear that a frontal attack offered little hope of success and Rommel in other circumstances would certainly be turned eastward to undermine the British position. However, the lack of gasoline prevented any attempt to maneuver”<sup>(82)</sup>.

As a result, while the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* remained firm in the area of Deir el Tarfa, at 06:40 the 15<sup>th</sup> alone moves against Alam el Halfa. At 10:52 De Stefanis received a triumphant message from command of the army: “*15th Armored Division took hill. 132 at 08:45*”. Unfortunately the news lacked any foundation. He knows neither the task nor the objective assigned to the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, in any case, it is strange that faces alone the English 44<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., which now had located on the ridge between the avventurasse and the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., whose existence was aware for the previous afternoon and the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., that knew to direct experience being well positioned on hill 102.

The result was that the Division headed at first against the left flank of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., renewing the attempt of 31 August, then, in view of the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., dealt with the latter. However, after a short battle and when considered, the illusion, that action takes a turn to a happy conclusion von Randow realized with horror that his tanks had gasoline for just forty kilometers more. Then, unable to refuel in front of the structures of Alam el Halfa, under the violent fire of British batteries, abandoned the match.

Ruling out the hypothesis of an attempt to exercise with only hope, totally unjustified, unpredictable result, the explanation probably lies in the admission of Bayerlein: “*the power of defenses on Alam el Halfa Hill for me a real surprise; I was sure to conquer and insisted too long in a useless attack.*”<sup>(83)</sup>

The setback imposed additional changes to the initial plan. At noon Rommel had specified to De Stefanis, summoned to the tactical Command of the AIT and aware of things being as they were, to deploy the XX Corp. with *Ariete* and *Littorio* alignment Deir el Muhafid (north rim)-Hani Qabr Zada and *Trieste* in the second row, as was his understanding “*to attack at 17:00*”



to reach the area 5 km. North of the positions currently occupied", i.e. to advance at Deir el Hima - hill 102<sup>(84)</sup>. Now, evidently, a new isolated strain was unthinkable, so no wonder if at 18:00 De Stefanis felt order is not the beginning of the attack to which it was prepared, but the replacement of the *Ariete* with *Trieste*, to be carried out during the night so that it is available as a reserve corps. At 22:45 arrived at AIT Command the confirmation to settle into the defense, while remaining in measure to resume the offensive toward North<sup>(85)</sup>.

Ultimately you can't doubt a temporary supply crisis, however there is doubt that on 1 September, rather than gasoline, perhaps it was a tactical situation that Rommel, sick and worried, had no confidence to dominate.

Montgomery, however, had finally shaken off the initial uncertainty: now had the belief of an enemy attack to Alam el Halfa (as desired) and no longer to the East, towards El Hammam. If prior to the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. he was left with his two brigades in advanced position than the Ridge could now collect about 400 tanks of the 8<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> Brigade between Alam el Halfa and Alam Nayil, ready to intervene against a massive German-Italian effort. Then the 2<sup>nd</sup> South African Inf. Bd. moved north of Alam el Halfa, to a position already equipped; the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Bd. with the 7<sup>th</sup> field artillery and 49<sup>th</sup> anti-tank artillery, abandoned the Eastern fringes of Ruweisat, where it was replaced by the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Inf. Bd., and the took over northern sector of the *box* from the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div.; to the rear of it was the 151<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bd. of the 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div.

On the front of the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Div. meanwhile had ended operation *Balimba*: a raid planned for a long time, launched as soon as profiled Rommel's offensive, with the aim of creating a breach, if possible, to reach the supply channel of the AIT in the area immediately south of Tell el Eisa. At 05:30, after a quarter of an hour of preparation pitched by two field artillery regiments and a heavily battery and with the support of day bombers, the 2/15<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Australian 20<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd., backed by a squadron of the 40<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, moved to the attack hill 25 of Tell el Eisa, held by the German III/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf.. The fight, which involved with fire units of the II/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. of the *Trento*, lasted over three hours, but at 09:00 Gen. Windeyer, Commander of the Australian Brigade, ordered the retreat with a nothing done. The Australians had 39 dead, 109 wounded and 25 prisoners and lost seven *Valentine*; the Germans seem to have had a hundred among dead and wounded and 140 prisoners.

The unfolding of events began to accrue in Montgomery ideas of a counterattack on a master plan. His plan, communicated to Ramsden and Horrocks in the afternoon, included the establishment of a reserve on the part of 30 Corps, the gradual closing of the gap between Alam Nayil Qaret el Himeimat and the work of the infantry of 13<sup>th</sup> Corps, set up a concrete point by 10<sup>th</sup> Corps (Gen. Lumsden), which in due course would have taken control of all units in reserve to go with them until El Daba. It was a rough draft, because the Italian-German offensive seemed not nipped in spite of the continuous and heavy raids of the *Desert Air Force* and the impressive volume of fire of the batteries.

Rommel was increasingly strained. The DAK continued to be particularly targeted and the loss they feel. In that day the command of the *Afrikakorps* had lost seven officers. "Again – he said - *I pondered whether, in view of poor logistical situation, I had to suspend the battle.*" The axis air inferiority now had become apparent and the few groups of fighters were engaged by the strongest opposing units soon appeared to counter the waves of British bombers. The English artillery, then, seemed to have inexhaustible reserves of ammunition. I mean "*did not appear as possible move large formations and determine in advance the running speed*" he noted Rommel. And the fuel issue was really taking on disturbing aspects.

On 30 August he had started the offensive relying in a telegram of the Comando Supremo:

"(...) About fuel, ongoing movements allow predicting arrival within day September 3 over five thousand tons per unit part retardation that Germanic was expected to arrive the 1<sup>st</sup> it is due to losses at sea and communication made from two Germanic steamers at Piraeus.

About 1,500 tons ammunition previewed arrival before the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> 1,100 tons.

All these predictions, like previous ones, not the arrival but insurance starting load forecast, on which motion and affects of course enemy offense that requires a continuous battle for each transport as repeated multiple times (...)" <sup>(86)</sup>

and the news of the sinking of the *Sant'Andrea* with 1,300 tons. gasoline for the Germans, took place just the 30<sup>th</sup>, was not compensated by assurance of Cavallero, through, "*Delease were taken immediate measures to accelerate to the maximum transport fuels. It considers that the measures taken will help resolve the delicate problem*"

The concerns were not only the German side. That

day with Gen. Palma, Intendente N.A., signaled that Barbasetti, including stocks held within the AIT, had petrol until September 3 and diesel up to the 14<sup>th</sup>, adding: *"From today I had to suspend sending gasoline ahead for availability" and "deficiency if by tomorrow morning doesn't come gasoline for the Intendente to ensure two days of consumption beyond September 3 until September 5 and including , must withdraw 100 tones further Germanic loan & to oblige more than the 100 tones getting from the R. Aeronautica"*. In essence, Palma concluded, the evident inability to pull ahead, both loans of gasoline was sent to Africa in cans using submarines. The daily intake of 60-70 tons to overcome the critical moment<sup>(87)</sup>.

At night, they say, leads the Council, but the night on September 2 brought back to long hours of aerial bombardment from *Wellington* and *Albacore*, which they dropped 4,000 lb bombs and many lit flares to the battlefield.

## 2 SEPTEMBER

In the late morning Rommel is resigned to the decision to halt the offensive and withdraw step by step the positions of Bab el-Qattara El Taqa. "The attack could not break through" acknowledged<sup>(88)</sup>. At 14:30 he went to the command of XX Corps and he communicated to De Stefanis the harsh need moving to the West by *February*, the more advanced British minefield. The motion would have taken place in stages and for echelons, considering the activity of the British 4<sup>th</sup> light Arm. Bd. with exposed the flank and the rear of the DAK and XX Corp<sup>(89)</sup>. It is certain that not all the units realized the situation. Ceriana Mayneri, for example, was extremely puzzled:

“In the morning [?], on Gen. De Stefanis, he called to his Command, tells me that our action had more demonstrative character: it was an offensive reconnaissance in force! ... so now must be considered exhausted. Trying to explain the reasons for this odd arrest, due to scarcity of fuel (if it was, we knew before!), suffered considerable losses and the strong resistance the enemy not yet affected deeply and far superior to our offensive capabilities! But the same De Stefanis does not seem convinced ...”<sup>(90)</sup>.

And also in the context of *Ariete* and *Trieste* were reactions of disbelief especially on one point: how was it possible that Rommel had started the maneuver without gasoline?

At 17:30 Kesselring went to the command of the army. In those days had closely followed the battle without hiding the clear bias towards the continuation of the offensive. Rommel's illustrated a comprehensive framework of disastrous effectiveness of raids of the *Desert Air Force* and the serious crisis in supplies and invoked an intervention against both scourges. The latest news concerning the sinking of the *Picci Fazio* and the probable loss of the *Abruzzi* 40 miles from Derna. No alternative existed on what to do. It seems that Kesselring tried to dissuade Rommel from waiver continue and argued that a decision so serious invested a politico-military field falling outside from the duties of Commander of the AIT. But Rommel remained firm in his purpose and not changed opinion even when Kesselring promised, to intervene with all his transport aircraft.

In the evening communicate to the Comando Supremo, through Mancinelli, told of the decision. The availability of fuel, from the ports of landing the army, amounted in total to three ships, then at most could cope with the demands until 5 September. Of 5,000 tons. announced, 2,600 had already been sunk and admitting that the steamers *Bianchi* and *Sportivo* enter the port of Tobruk, the next they were carrying gasoline (three ships) would not get to the army the 7<sup>th</sup>. Apart from this strict operational reasons induced the painful decision. Unfortunately ignored the existence of numerous minefields had delayed the advance and made to vanish the surprise, essential premise for the success of the plan and the constant enemy air attacks, diurnal and nocturnal, they had put a strain on the combative capacity of troops. "*Ultimately the army will withdraw therefore on the starting positions, gradually, under pressure, under pressure from the enemy and the supply situation*"<sup>(91)</sup> *air did not change radically*".

The evacuation of occupied area was to begin the 3<sup>rd</sup>, with the withdraw of the bulk of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light and the *Littorio*. The evacuated positions were temporarily entrusted to the units of the *Trieste* and the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*. Then, in echelons, they withdrew the other divisions.

In the afternoon, Montgomery made his usual ride to the Corps commands. Was very happy with how things were progressing. The first two days of fighting had passed without any real advantage by Rommel. Also the *Enigma* messages decryption had informed of the schedule of axis supplies had been further upset by the sinking of the

*S. Andrea*, and the *Royal Air Force* had notified the sinking of the *Picci Fazio* and the big damage inflicted to the *Abruzzi*. It was clear the enemy's reluctance to insist in the offensive, much to suggest a change of tactics: instead of continuing in the effort, probably Rommel had opted for a defensive attitude intended to provoke a British counterattack.

However, while noting that the AIT position began to emerge precarious, Montgomery refused to fall into the "trap" and was limited to order to Horrocks "*destroy enemy transport and close gradually, but methodically, the bag*" pushing southward Freyberg for four to five kilometers. The next day he would send the 151<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bn., release one of the New Zealand brigades and allow Freyberg, two days later, to approach even more to Qaret el Himeimat.

Toward nightfall the 4<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> Hussars attempted to repeat the raid against the vehicle's complex east of Qaret el Himeimat, but this time they encountered a tank battalion and a group of 75/18 semoventi of the *Ariete* who repulsed them with losses.

### 3 SEPTEMBER

The overall situation had necessitated the adoption of precautionary measures to protect the exposed flank of DAK and the immediate rear. Once decided the retreat, the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* received orders to turn Southwest by pivoting on the 21<sup>st</sup>, while elements of the Recon KG were to defend the ground for maneuver by provenances from the South and Southeast. During the morning of September 3 the Italian-German deployment had assumed the appearance of a large salient leaned with his back to the great British minefields: the *Brescia* up to Deir el Angar; the Ramcke Brigade on the right; the 90<sup>th</sup> Light at Deep Well; the *Trieste* at Deir el Muhafid, the *Littorio* in Qabr Hani Zada, all facing north; followed the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* at Deir el Tarfa facing north and East; the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* from Samaket Gaballa, facing East; the Recon KG Southwest of the 15<sup>th</sup> up to Qaret el Himeimat, facing South. In reserve, the *Ariete*, Southeast of Deir el Munassib (sketch No. 72). Montgomery wanted to cutoff the salient at the base, starting from Alan Nayil and proceeding slowly to Qaret el Himeimat. Rommel wanted to evacuate him trying not to precipitate the situation.

Before 08:00, Montgomery ordered to resist every temptation

## LA SITUAZIONE DELL'AIT AL MATTINO DEL 3 SETTEMBRE

Hand-drawn map of the El Qattani area in Egypt, showing military positions and movements. The map includes labels for various locations such as Alam el Qattani, Alam el Khatim, and Alam el Nasser. It also shows the positions of the 1st, 5th, 6th, 9th, and 13th British Infantry (B.IN), the 10th Division (D. cor.), and the 1st, 5th, 6th, 9th, and 13th British New Zealand (B.NZ) battalions. The map features a scale bar from 0 to 10 km and a north arrow.

by rushing to the attack. Only patrols could be entrusted with the destruction of vehicles. Calm reigned supreme until, around noon, the *Desert Air Force*, which who persisted in his action,, not reported three large columns of retreating towards the axis minefields. The 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. immediately was appointed to act on the southern flank of the enemy, but the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. was committed to the East of Deir el Ragil against the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and the 4<sup>th</sup> light Arm. Bd., of which many pieces and vehicles were stranded in the soft sand, was unable to combine anything against Italian and German recon units.

In Rome Rommel was entirely unexpected. No one, it seems, had not yet realized how truly were things in Africa. On September 1<sup>st</sup> Cavallero had received Gen. Marras, entrusting ahead of the main event in Berlin: that the troops that would enter in Alexandria and Cairo had to be Italian and German and not only in Germany. The issue was of great importance because it was "*protecting the prestige of the Italians, who supported the first battle in the Mediterranean*".

On the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, known the fate of *Picci Fassio* and the *Abruzzi*, Cavallero had snagged the departure of other steamers in the same day with 2,770 tons. gasoline for the Germans and more than 1,000 for the Italians, and decided to send overseas two officers of the Comando Supremo to

“(…) lift up the hearts of those who are in Libya, because I understand that news of the sinkings of the tankers may have alarmed them. Do you get the petrol the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> and the following days. We'll leave the available aircraft in Tatoi, keeping them in number and drawing if necessary from Lecce. The measures of the Comando Supremo will save the situation. When none of the traveling more fuel tankers will arrive better“<sup>(92)</sup>.

Though Rommel's communication does not seem to have been implemented in its full severity, in fact the answer to Cavallero, compiled after the examination of the situation made with Mussolini at noon of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, was optimistic:

“Duce acknowledges your determination to suspend attacks. That supplies will be intensified to the maximum possible to put the German-Italian army able to repel possible enemy attack & victoriously pass to the counterattack. Meanwhile, recall your attention on possible enemy attempt on Siwa”<sup>(93)</sup>.

Not a word about AIT's failure in front of the 8th Army.

On the afternoon of September 3 the two Comando Supremo officers presented themselves, one Major. Pistotti, under the command of the army and the other, Maj. Patti., a delegation of the Comando Supremo.

The Major Pistotti conferred with the G.S.'s Chief, Gen. Gause, and illustrated the program start-up fuel. On the route of the West were to arrive between 11 and 14 September three steamships with 621 tons gasoline in drums to R. Army, 390 for R. Aeronautica and 1,000 for German divisions. The Eastern route was planned the following loads of gasoline: four ships on 5 September with 1,300 tons for Italians and 3,000 for the Germans; five between the 7 and 9 with 1,650 tons for Italians and 2,740 to the Germans; three of the 12 and 13 with 2,200 tons for Italians and 1,200 for the Germans. Also scheduled were 1,000 tons aviation gasoline of between 9 and 12 and 1,200 tons of diesel between 3 and 5 for the Italian forces.

Gause summed up briefly the negative factors that forced the interruption of the operation: deficiency of fuel, due to the lack of arrivals but especially to triple the normal consumption caused by the sandy soil in the area of attack; lack of surprise to the slowing of the movement caused by the numerous and extensive minefields; excessive power of the *Royal Air Force* especially at night. Enemy air raids did not allow a stop on the reached positions; It was necessary to advance or recede. Advancing with little fuel meant without being in the moment of the encounter with the enemy and thus expose themselves to be beaten. It only remained to recede. The movement was underway without British pressure, gradually and in relation to the need to recover the damaged material. Had not yet been established the stop line. Could result in that, or the other, between the minefields, enemies that doing so would have been exploited without expense. A possible resumption of the offensive was subordinated to the overcoming of the current serious fuel crisis and, secondly, the establishment of adequate stocks. However, he could not speak before two months (Moon of October) and was to see if in the meantime the 8<sup>th</sup> Army hadn't taken the initiative.

Overall, Major Pistotti wrote in the report, the apparent alive disappointment for the failure of the German company, whose victorious outcome had not doubted, together with reliance in the future. And also another thing transpired: the Germans doubted not of good will, but were convinced that the organization and execution of transport of fuel were not free from error capable of frustrating any sacrifice <sup>(94)</sup>.



The Major Patti received the Italian situation: petrol Delease enough until the 6<sup>th</sup>, thanks to the loan of 600 tons. Germany and 50 from the R. Aeronautica but ... reducing 50% of supplies to major units (left with little or nothing); enough diesel until 19 September. Two opinions of Delease, however, leaving uncertain: that the Intendenza could “*meet every need*” with the vehicles available and therefore takes precedence over sending it was for the major units; It was appropriate to “*increase foundation in Tripoli*”, especially of vehicles, ammunition, foodstuffs and a share of fuel. No doubt about the desperate needs of Corps and divisions in terms of vehicles, but the claim of full fitness of the Intendenza seems a little too peremptory, remember that it had centralized into their own hands the means of Superlibia and was in strong discomfort. How to land in Tripoli material intended for AIT, in those circumstances it was likely not to send even in Africa.

On September 3 the activity of the *Desert Air Force* reached the highest point of its activity in that period, favored especially by its static nature of opposites sides and the vulnerability of the axle unit to attack. Altogether, more than 500 British and American aircraft made 2,700 missions, amounting to 35 planes per hour of the day or night in the sky of the battlefield.

## THE END OF THE BATTLE

In the night on 4 September began the operation *Beresford* (initially named Wellington), tending to the occupation of northern edge of Deir Alinda and terrain between Deir el Munassib and Deir Muhafid. Freyberg had available the British 132<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd. (Gen. Robertson), disengaged as mentioned from the 5th Indian Bd., and 5th New Zealand Inf. Bd. (Gen. Kippenberger). The first, strengthened by the 46<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* and supported by the 4<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, was to attack between *February* and *January*; the second, with the 5<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* and 6<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, between the third and fourth minefield (sketch No. 73). The attack had an overall width of about five kilometers; the depth of the goals was about six kilometers. An intervention by the 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Inf. Bd. (Gen. Clifton) against Deir el Angar, intended to distract the attention of the axis and to protect the western flank of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd., would have facilitated the undertaking. The

## L'OPERAZIONE BERESFORD (notte sul 4 settembre)

This is a hand-drawn military map of the Baghdad area, illustrating German positions and movements during the 1968 invasion. The map features several key elements:

- Units and Positions:** Various German units are labeled, including 5° B.f.NZ (appearing twice), 6° B.f.NZ, 132° B.f.UK, 107° f., 165° f., 90° f., 21° Panzer, and 15° Panzer. A unit III/104 is also noted near the bottom right.
- Locations:** Key locations marked include Al-Ramadiya, Al-Ramadi, Dura el-Muhafid, and Dura el-Najaf.
- Movements:** Arrows indicate the direction of movement or attacks from various units towards the city center.
- Defensive Lines:** Solid and dashed lines represent defensive perimeters and boundaries.
- Scale:** A scale bar at the bottom left indicates distances of 0, 1, 2, and 3 km.
- Legend:** A legend at the bottom right identifies symbols for "DAK" (represented by three crosses) and another symbol (represented by a circle).

the plan had undergone several changes, however as he had been finally approved seemed to Freyberg promise “*good results*”. Actually ended with a *notable* fiasco.

Already the preliminaries were lackluster. In the late evening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> the gathering of troops around Alam Nayil became such as to cause a great confusion and to move the start of the attack. Partly for this reason, partly for organizational foresight, stages of the operation took place more or less independently of one another and scaling in tempo.

The first move was made by the 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade, which with the bulk from the North attacked the positions of Deir el Angar, held from the I and II/19<sup>th</sup> Infantry and of the *Brescia*, while a part, disembarked South of Alam Nayil, should contribute to the action from the East. The main effort, started at about 22:00 after a preparation of artillery by about ten minutes, was resolved in a short time and the New Zealanders withdrew with about fifty casualties but having reduced very badly coming from the I/19<sup>th</sup> Inf. The more concrete result, however, resulted in having put on alert all axis troops south of Alam Nayil.

The 132<sup>nd</sup> Brigade headed towards its objectives in a strange formation: the IV and V *Royal West Kent*, followed by fifteen *Valentine*, moving between the first and the second minefield towards the positions held by the IX and X/187<sup>th</sup> Inf. Folgore of the Hubner parachute group; the second block and the II *Buffys* acted isolated with a precarious link radio between the second and third minefield, in the direction from preparations realized by the 90<sup>th</sup> Light. To the right of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Brigade were the 26<sup>th</sup> New Zealand battalion and part of 25<sup>th</sup>, with the task of covering the English Western flank.

The two battalions of the *West Kent* did not provide for the meeting with the enemy at least until the northern edge of Deir Alinda. He was therefore surprised that, at 23:00, found lying a short distance from the units of the *Folgore* (the IX and the X parachute battalion were, overall, a thousand men). On the other hand these, warned that during the night German pioneers would have operated before the lines to lay tracks of mines, were equally taken aback. The initial moments of the clash were very confused. The British sought to increase the confusion by calling “comrades” to the Italians, infiltrating and eliminating advanced elements of the *Folgore* with the bayonet, in a melee. And it must be said that in general they create disorder and caused leaks. But the reaction of the defenders made quickly, leveraging consistency even

the intense glow of fires of the many British vehicles in flames.

After about three hours of fierce fighting, the British 132<sup>nd</sup> Brigade appeared in serious trouble. The radio link with the *West Kent* was blown, the IV *West Kent* stated in desperate conditions. Shortly after Gen. Robertson was injured, while the few and fragmentary news got to Brigade command from the wounded and stragglers returning back, isolated or in small groups, provided a very depressing about the progress of the fighting.

When, at 4 a.m., Freyberg, but still believed the failure of the operation, it was decided to call the Brigade, the *Kents* had lost a hundred dead and 300 prisoners, as well as abandoned much war material.

Also for the 26<sup>th</sup> New Zealand battalion the end result was negative. It was split from the start of the attack. The head engraved on the left of the X Parachute Battalion, broke through with several elements beyond the Italian positions (and these items will give quite a few annoyances in the day of the 4<sup>th</sup>) but without conclude much, nor did things vary with the coming into play the rest of the battalion.

Between 02:00 and 03:00 the situation crystallized: groups of attackers, remained between piles of corpses and carcasses of vehicles, shooting occasionally waking up suddenly the entire sector. Then the parachute patrols began to have lines to retrieve weapons and yet efficient means lying on the battlefield and to capture prisoners. In this circumstance a patrol captured Gen. Clifton, Commander of the New Zealand 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade with operational documents and marked maps, he got lost when he went to find his 26<sup>th</sup> battalion <sup>(95)</sup>.

Meanwhile the second notice of *Bufs* live fighting on his right, pushed up patrols to meet positions held by German paratroopers, remained uncertain about what to do without being connected to the Brigade command, then at dawn arrived an order he that passed to the New Zealand 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade.

Gen. Kippenberger reported some success, but instead the conclusion couldn't be much different. At 22:00 the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade headed south between the third and fourth minefield, with the 28<sup>th</sup> *Maori* Battalion right and the 21<sup>st</sup> left; It followed a squadron of *Valentine*; the 23<sup>rd</sup> battalion was in second echelon with, part of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. At first there emerged difficulties, but soon there was a dangerous disconnect: the 21<sup>st</sup> battalion diverted towards

the East, lining up along the Western side of the fourth mine field, while the *Maori* continued in a straight line on their own towards the 90<sup>th</sup>. Between the two battalions, the *Valentine* of the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, followed by a unit of the 22<sup>nd</sup> battalion, proceeded alone, deceived by German signal rockets, who believed friends and intended to indicate the way forward. Went to crash into a minefield defended by the German 155<sup>th</sup> Inf., almost all exploded on mines.

The big *Maori* column was adventurous. Initially met the German 900<sup>th</sup> Engineers battalion; made off, it headed west, penetrating where there was no resistance. In this wandering ran in the *Trieste*. This, already settled in defense in the area of Deir el Muhafid, at 15:30 had received orders to pull back to Deir el Munassid to protect the ongoing retreat of the *Ariete* and the *Littorio*, leaving in place only the cornerstone of the 1<sup>st</sup> company of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry, placed at the far left of the Division, at the turn of the track from Alam Nayil, to control the interval between two minefields. Shortly before 18:00, the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry abandoned Deir el Muhafid and an hour later began to gather a few kilometers south of the 1<sup>st</sup> company; at 19:30 the 66<sup>th</sup> Infantry was to begin the retrograde movement to the new location, established to the West of the 65<sup>th</sup> infantry.

The first shock of New Zealand took shape towards 21:30. Positions held by struck a German parachute battalion of the Ramcke Brigade and a company of the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry, and gradually increasing in intensity. Then, half-overran the Italian stronghold<sup>(96)</sup>, spread southward down the track and came in contact with the left of the I/65<sup>th</sup> infantry, still in phase of installation. In the dark the situation became extremely confused, but the 66<sup>th</sup> Infantry, from Deir el Muhafid, sided immediately west of the 65<sup>th</sup>, facing north, closing the dangerous gap between German paratroopers and 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry. The fight lasted until dawn, when attackers managed to break away under the protection of heavy concentrations of artillery. However, the *Trieste* had to suffer a lot, especially for the fire of enemy batteries: 140 casualties, 13 vehicles and some unit weapons destroyed.

A part of the *Maori* went even further towards the West, ending up against the extreme right of the IX battalion of the *Folgore* and here the momentum ended. Lost many men and most of the injured, the small unit went back to rejoin to his battalion.

Altogether, including mopping up actions, losses

of the 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry amounted to 38 dead (including two battalion commanders) and 45 wounded (including the Regimental Commander).

At the dawn of the 4<sup>th</sup> Operation *Beresford* diminish. Rommel ordered a vigorous counterattack by a local battalion of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* with a company of the *Trieste*. At noon the New Zealand 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade was rejected North of Deir el Munassib, then quickly the enemy action died. Meanwhile, the *Ariete* and the *Littorio*, past minefields, leaving East of *January* two bridgeheads to the South and West with the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bns.

New Zealand gain consisted of a couple of kilometers of desert area and in creating a dangerously exposed salient. It was originally envisaged a continuation of the effort, but at 19:20 after a reconnaissance ride of the front, Freyberg dissuaded Horrocks from such an idea and, rather than leave the troops on solidity uncertain positions, proposed a complete withdrawal. Montgomery, brought to the attention of the proposal approved. Attack losses were heavy: 700 men of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd., 124 of the 5<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. and 159 of the 6<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd.. The agenda of Freyberg said, among other things: "*if we compare our losses with those inflicted on the enemy and evaluate the consequences that our operation has had on the level of the opponent, we must say that the success of the operation was significant*"<sup>(97)</sup>. Evidently alluded to the retreat of the mass of maneuver of the AIT, which depended on much more and had already been decided before.

The renunciation to the offensive left its mark in the Italian-German troops. Worth in this regard the record contained in the historical diary of XX Corps:

"The short run withdraw and the abandonment of some positions gained has much affected the morale of the troops, doing all the excitement wane of the early days of the offensive and someone, not realizing the reasons that could have determined the decision back to initial positions he even judged the situation serious and precarious".

At 05:00 of September 8, while De Stefanis was talking to his three divisional about provisions for a better unit set-up, Rommel went to the command of the XX Corps and announced that the dramatic situation of supplies forced to adopt a defensive attitude and that the offensive had been suspended because of lack of fuel.

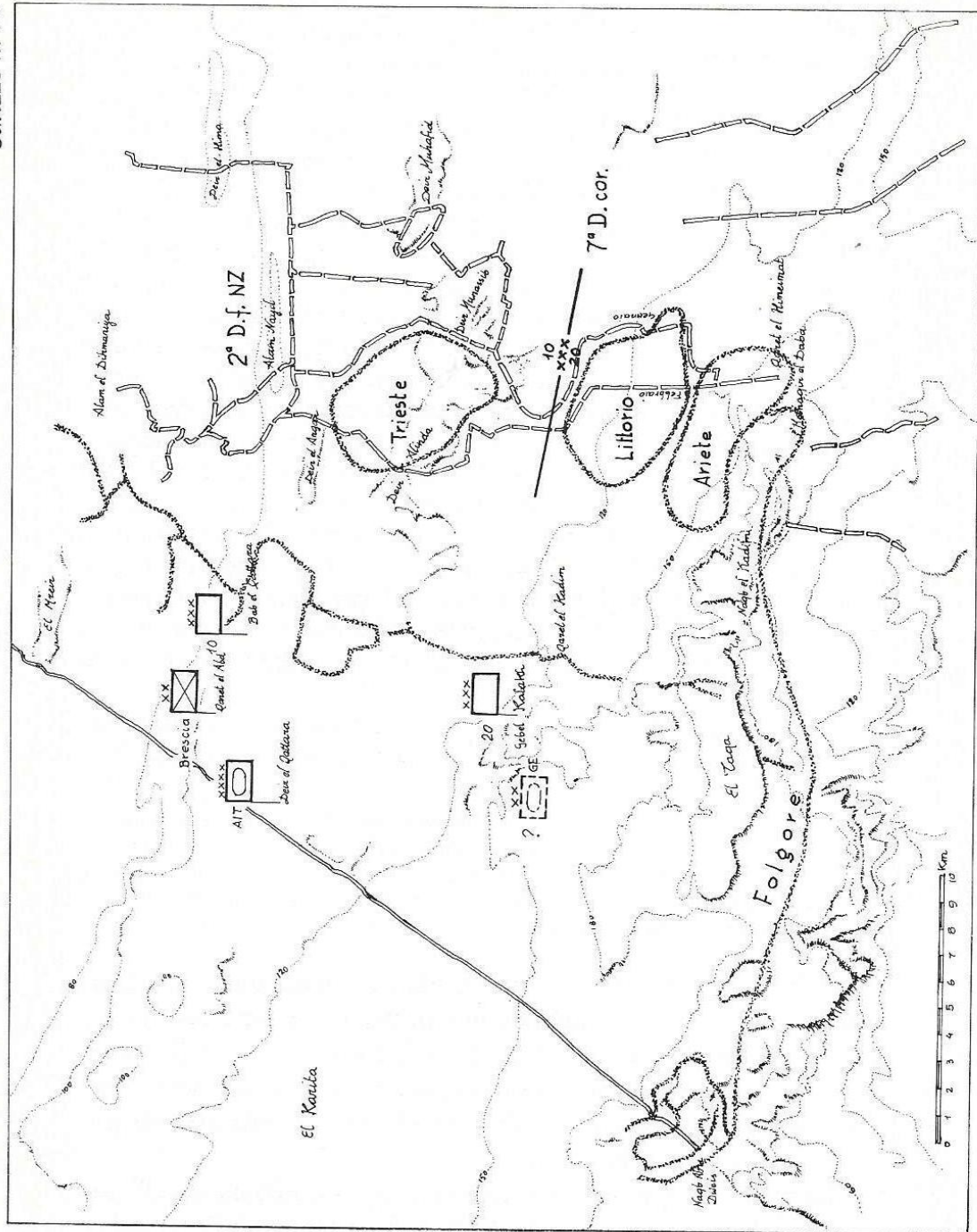
The new line of resistance was to be organized on the alignment East Bab el Qattara-Deir el-Deir el Munassib Angar-Qaret el Himeimat (sketch No. 74). The *Trieste*, deployed between Deir el Angar and Deir



Rommel's orders for the new lineup (6 September)

GLI ORDINI DI ROMMEL PER IL NUOVO SCHIERAMENTO  
(6 settembre)

Schizzo n. 74



El Munassib (inclusive), passed under the X Corps, while the XX Corps was responsible of the area between Deir el Munassib and Qaret el Himeimat and South front by Qaret el Himeimat, indeed, Naqb Abu Dweis, using for this purpose the 187<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Folgore* with the II and IV battalion, and 186<sup>th</sup> Inf. command with the V battalion. The defense should be to the East between the two large minefields, with the *Littorio* North and *Ariete* to the South. The DAK for the moment was still East of *January* but soon would be withdrawn and detached with a division towards the sea and the other in the area of Jebel Kalakh. As soon as possible the XX Corps would pass in reserve. The withdraw of the DAK came to an end on 6 September without undue interference from the opposing side. Montgomery, who had at first believed the intention of Rommel to return to the starting positions, eventually realized that his antagonist was intended to stop at the minefields and at 07:00 of 7 September decided to leave them alone. Horrocks protested that doing so not only were given away to the enemy the British minefields, but also excellent observation points on 13 Corps, but Montgomery explained that Rommel would see very well all the preparations of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army intended to ... deceive him on the future third battle of El Alamein<sup>(98)</sup>. The thesis seems a little shaky, but Horrocks had to be content.

Summing up, the two armies reported the following losses, considering the total number of dead, wounded and missing for the personnel and the only means for destroyed tanks and trailers:

|                | AIT   |           |       | 8 <sup>th</sup> Army<br>(**) |
|----------------|-------|-----------|-------|------------------------------|
|                | Ger.  | It. (***) | Total |                              |
| Men            | 1,804 | 1,051     | 2,855 | 1,640                        |
| Field Pieces   | 11    | 6         | 17    | ?                            |
| Anti-tank Guns | 20    | 16        | 36    | 18                           |
| Tanks          | 36    | 11        | 47    | 68                           |
| Vehicles       | 227   | 97        | 324   | ?                            |
| Aircraft       | 36    | 5         | 41    | 68                           |

(\*) Data provided by Rommel to OKW. Alexander in his quoted *Dispatch* said that 42 German and Italian 11 tanks, almost 700 vehicles, 30 field guns and 40 anti-tank guns were abandoned on the battlefield.

(\*\*) Data provided by Alexander in his *Dispatch*.

(\*\*\*) The losses of the XX Corps between August 30 and September 4 were 59 dead, 228 wounded and 134 missing; 11 armored vehicles, 84 vehicles, 6 field pieces and 9 anti-tank guns



#### 4. CONSIDERATIONS.

There is little to say about the second battle of El Alamein: was a battle. Rommel spoke in his notes it, but you'd prefer restore since said during a large report held the commanders of Army Corps and Division on September 22, before returning to Germany to seek treatment. About the disappointing offensive, the latest on African soil, he said:

“(...) We had to stop the recent offensive operations depending on the catastrophic situation of supplies. In a few days were sunk several thousands of tons of shipping. The attack was, on the other hand, linked to moonlight.

Us operations have provided useful lessons. Only those who act by surprise and quickly can achieve success; We must cross in the shortest time possible minefields; each stop due to logistic needs, as do the full tanks is detrimental. Once you start the attack, it must develop without any stops for refueling or otherwise; just how quickly does suffer the losses.

We were forced to stop to remove minefields and to maintain fuel supplies; This allowed the opponent to concentrate artillery and aviation against us.

Before the attack the commanders of the German and Italian air forces had assured us that we would not have had to fear from enemy aviation; the efficiency of this had not been correctly assessed. Enemy air action was strong; diurnal and nocturnal bombing raids have been our nightmare, especially for their moral effects. I trust that our air forces are able to obtain similar effects against the enemy. The combats of the fighter have little impact; the use of the *Stuka* was found to be a dripping of water. We had to endure repeated air raids on the same points; the enemy failed even at night to find his objectives: he targeted mainly anti-aircraft pieces and 88's.

The army has stopped the offensive and took defensive positions that will be favorable for a future attack. We could include in our southern positions the British minefields and we have at our disposal the dominant soil, which gives us a good chance for more operations.

I trust that in the coming weeks and months ahead we can strengthen the army. The problem is only a matter of supplies. Utmost importance is the mastery of the Mediterranean. For now, the army does not receive enough to live.

We too strive for proceeding towards Egypt, but now we cannot venture a new offensive. I'll pass on the offensive when I have enough to do so; strong equipment of gasoline, vehicles of all kinds and actual. Meanwhile we defensively. Of course the defense will be supplemented by offensive ideas here and there, where the enemy offers opportunity (...)”<sup>(99)</sup>,

However seemed aware that it was now unlikely the last chance to occupy the Suez Canal”<sup>(100)</sup>.

Let's see, or rather we return once again presented subjects: surprise, aviation, supplies.

The lack of surprise is ascribed to the minefields, to delay the march of the units, especially of the XX Corps, to know of the plan by the British. Underestimation of the mine obstacle is clearly the responsibility of the German command: fields were very poorly known in their size and the exact location and no *specific* surveys had been accomplished previously. It was believed to be in a generic way disjointed elements and of limited blocking value, not such so as to represent obstruction. Consequently, the calculation of time was done by the command AIT as if from the collection area to the base for the attack (from 40 to 60 kilometers) was a matter of a simple transfer of gear. The reservations formulated by De Stefanis on the narrowness and rigidity of these times were unsuccessful: the enemy should not be considered and the plan would have succeeded only by faithfully setting either. This mental attitude. So at 03:00 of August 31, when the columns side by side and neatly should touch the base paths were not eight kilometers. And at 05:00, now scheduled for the beginning of the attack, the divisions were always entangled in the minefields, waiting for the slow and laborious outflow of the large vehicle mass, constantly subject to pounding action of the *Desert Air Force*.

In terms of surprise, ignoring the decryption of *Enigma* messages and the English while attributing to the intense activity of the large British aerial reconnaissance for the merits timely detection of maneuver, Rommel did not lose the opportunity to mention, however briefly and in doubtful form, something that had previously been subject to very heavy doubts against the Italian ally. The surprise factor would have failed even to get the enemy received precise directions on the AIT operating design: “*some British said even that the Command had been informed them of our plan of attack on southern front by a senior officer of the Italian army*”<sup>(101)</sup>. It is true that estimated noting that dutiful Bayerlein that entry had not substantiated by the enemy, but accuracy is good.

On 8 September Rommel reported to von Rintelen that British prisoners had declared to be Italian soldiers, fallen into British hands,

very prone to talk: news of particular value for the operation of the AIT would be provided by an official (made no mention of *superior officer*) captured shortly before the action. Of course the Comando Supremo asked the names of the prisoners in question for the headlights and re-interrogated thoroughly by Deleuse, of course the presence of a German officer. The AIT Command said announcing the arrival in Rome of the minutes of interrogation by Leut. Col. von Mellenthin, who returned, but - The only document presented was referring to a British sergeant and the statement remained in the absolute vagueness and generality. Now Cavallero, having instructed Gen. Marras to report this to the OKW, meaning that "*the Italian Comando Supremo does not comment and let the OKW to judge and to provide in the way it deems most appropriate*" <sup>(102)</sup> Rommel replied very curtly to:

"Supreme Command received & examined the verbal questioning of British prisoners sent out by this command with f. 6706, 11 September. On the basis of this review, the Comando Supremo found that interrogation was not pursued & missing therefore the necessary validity to justify assertion contained in the telegram 6179 of the AIT Command on 8 September. Comando Supremo is very sorry not to be given the possibility to proceed now to a more thorough interrogation of these prisoners as it was his purpose to do." <sup>(103)</sup>

The second crucial *element*, the massive preponderance of British aviation, there is little to comment: it was a fact. Recall that the tasks in offensive strategic field were entrusted by the Italian Air Force and the German side to the Aegean X *Fliegerkorps* based in Greece. Sometimes the Air Sicily provided reinforcements. Instead, for the support to the AIT, according to the agreements made at the time, the use of the units of the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet (Sector East) and *Fliegerfuhrer* was coordinated by the latter, which he received from Rommella the ground situation and intervention requests. The availability of equipment were, as we know, quite limited and, moreover, the increased use of Italian fighters necessarily done by Gen. Seidemann bore more of a concern. Marchesi, in fact, wanted to avoid the wear and tear of the entire contemporary fighter mass, which would not have found could be reinstated, as deliveries of aircraft and engines made by small series production gradually to not be increased. He, after the expected and already started influx into Libya of the 15<sup>th</sup> Stormo, Cavallero specified Fougier, "*it would be possible to any increase, as there are in other fighter and assault units in the homeland ready for use.*" <sup>(104)</sup>.

Incidentally, by mid-July the three Italian advanced landing fields were in the area west of Fuka and allow an appropriate decentralization of the airfield. The Germans, however, were pushed further to the East, so as to require a fighter protection on their sky continues rather than alarm, as in use by the Italians.

Apart from this, air-ground cooperation between the R. Aeronautics and Italian troops suffered severely from two shortcomings: very poor compliance of signal towels exposed units because too small, poorly visible and quickly assuming the color of the sand; lack of operational radio links with large units in line for unpreparedness of the army radio operators. These deficiencies were accentuated by the fact that the agreement between the R. Aeronautics and the Germans was excellent: the latter were largely using candles which smoke purple, very effective, and connections they worked so well that German intervention requests were granted, of course at the expense of the needs of the Italian divisions.

Rommel lamented had received assurances about the misleading air support from Marchesi and Seidemann, but is presumably intended to refer to Kesselring. In fact, preliminary meetings had been assured that axis fighters would always be able to intervene in the action, during daylight hours, minimizing if not zero danger of intense bombing. Conversely, it was clearly stated that lacked the means (i.e. the night fighter) if only to limit the enemy presence during the night. Unfortunately the air mass of Coningham proved strong and raged over the troops, causing, to the losses, a nervous strain that in the long run could not but weigh on the aggressiveness of men and commanders. Not for nothing the bulletin issued by the AIT on the evening of 1 September reported, among other things: *"Terrible air strikes carried out continuously day and night, have caused significant losses in personnel and material, influencing greatly on the fighting spirit of the troops."* However, the importance of the "losses" at the hands of the *Desert Air Force* seems susceptible to downsizing. Rommel said such losses be *"extraordinarily high"* and reported hearing Kesselring by the suspension of *Fliegerfuhrer* maneuver on the morning of the 31 was determined by the fact that Rommel had been "impressed" by the violence of the British aerial offense. Similar explanation not very convincing, Because the number of deaths and injuries during the six days it seems back in normality: just think of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div, only in operation *Beresford* lost a

thousand men. What must have affected negatively on Rommel was the havoc in the columns and the continuous state of tension arising from the raids of the *Desert Air Force*. When Kesselring said that the reverse was due firstly to psychological reasons, certainly alluding to British aviation.

The weight of the enemy aircraft, you can add just one of artillery. It was known for the excellent quality of the material, for the greater range and shooting modes. Added to this is an unthinkable availability of ammunition. No wonder if, given the intensity of interventions and the impossibility of a counter battery by the German-Italian, it immediately took a role of the first order.

The third subject called into question is the availability of fuel. The Achilles' heel for the AIT was the vulnerability of the communications line. Alexander rightly observed, that this had never been so precarious and that finding him to intensify air attacks against ships of the axis and especially tankers. The repercussions for the offensive were immediate due to the inexistence of a flywheel able to absorb disruptions in the flow of supplies from the Mainland.

On the morning of 1 September, with the advance of the 15th *Panzerdivision* since almost at Alam el Halfa, the tactical situation seemed in command AIT and DAK start to a happy conclusion. At that time he appeared in serious terms the gasoline crisis. The starting, like the other armored divisions, with a range of about 300 kilometers, the 15th *Panzer* reported a residue of just 40 kilometers. No compensation possible under the DAK; no hope of an early intervention by German logistics. Under these conditions, Rommel could not bring himself to continue.

On the subject took Kesselring this position. First held to accept responsibility for the failure to deliver the 500 ton of petrol by the AIT promised after the sinking of *S. Andrea*, with 1,300 tons of petrol for German units. Only after the war, he came to know that that amount was never arrived at its destination (Westphal explained that he had "*consumed alone*" in the journey towards the front), but "*I don't think this had a decisive importance*" he argued. And I explain:

“The fact that motorized forces made mobile defense operations until 6 September using the reserves still exist in Africa, proof that you have the fuel needed for the continuation of the offensive, especially by adding the amount which would have been captured from the enemy”<sup>(106)</sup>.

The reasoning is, at least in part, debatable. It may be to demonstrate the untimeliness of the advance's failure of DAK, but objectively one can't believe that von Vaerst took the decision without a real threatening petrol shortages. There was not enough *in Africa*. It was supposed to be on the battlefield. And obviously for 24 hours or less it missed the DAK and know what value had time in those days. How to continue the maneuver with the captured fuel, it is a rather risky thesis. Certainly war booty was largely used in this pause of the fighting, however a plan cannot be based on presumed acquisition of enemy depots. They are welcome, but considered at most as a *reserve*.

It is likely that each of the negative factors mentioned, as well as the loss of Nehring and Bismarck, has played its part in the determination of Rommel, however, as we noted Mancinelli: "*For obvious reasons, the General Staff of the AIT preferred then put in particular note the fuel factor, outside his sphere of responsibility, so that no relief of bad judgment and foresight could be raised against him*" <sup>(107)</sup>

Of course one cannot deny or minimize the meaning limited to the unavailability of petrol with the Germans (Italian tanks were equipped with diesel engine), on the other hand is incontrovertible, as is clear from the evidence above, that commanders and Staffs were convinced they could take another hit. While aware of the difficulties of supply; Despite knowing the incompleteness of the XX Corps, which, among other things, he had to leave on the initial positions two-thirds of the infantry and one-third of the artillery; Despite having reason to believe that the repetition of the operation scheme put in place in Ain el-Gazala was under command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army on the basis of a simple examination of the topographic map; Despite possessing evidence about the superiority of the *Royal Air Force*; Despite knowing all this, Kesselring, Gause, Nehring, Bayerlein were, in those days or later, confident in the success of the plan. It seems there has been even greater conviction for this battle than for that of el-Ain Gazala. Now the more dubious was Rommel, on which acted "*certainty that if we had gone inactive at the time of the full moon, we would have lost forever once last chance to resume the offensive*". <sup>(108)</sup>

Keener criticism to Rommel's mental attitude was driven by Kesselring. In his view, on 1 September victory at Alam

el Halfa was "already at hand" and the suspension offered the opponent the opportunity to recover. From this premise follows logically the negative comment:

"When (...) with the right decision or not-is not the case here to express an opinion about it-it was at the time of the attack, the action should be continued without stopping, and without regard to the losses, so that the troops could overcome the critical point, explain on a less dangerous terrain and evade enemy aviation action. This iron-clad resistance will fail; If it did not exist from the beginning, it would have been better not to even start an operation which were known the immense risks. The operation itself had a good chance of success is demonstrated in the best way by the judgment expressed by Montgomery the difficulties to trim down a German attack in August" <sup>(109)</sup>.

The fact is that the victory was *never* at hand and Bayerlein admitted frankly not have even suspected the robustness of features ordered by Montgomery at Alam el Halfa. Let us add that Montgomery spoke of *August*, not of the *end of August*.

From the opposing side, the battle was set and conduct together as yet had never been, expecting the use of ground artillery and tanks with general intent strictly defensive. While, therefore, Rommel was wide rely on known slowness of reactions and command of British troops, this time he was opposed an unexpected stillness. Of course, this passive attitude was planned only within certain limits of static defense: If the mass of the AIT armor had turned to the East of Alam el Halfa, in the direction of El Hammam, the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. It would precipitate with its 400 tanks on the exposed flank and rear of the Italian and German columns.

For us it was a decisive failure because it was obvious that Rommel, not having won, he could no longer win; but for the English one cannot speak of decisive victory; Montgomery had not launched its tanks against the XX Corps and the DAK still South of Alam el Halfa; Neither insisted to sever the base of the salient created by them; nor attacked the retreat Italian-German mass to destroy it. Alexander exonerated him, recalling that his motto was: *no losses*, that is, in layman's terms: "*first, do not take them.*" Like many other scholars or protagonists, von Mellenthin observed that the conduct of the battle by Montgomery was in line with the best English traditions and indicates a strong combination to some victories of Wellington, but "*there is no doubt that he has deliberately left to lose an excellent*

*opportunity to isolate and destroy the Afrikakorps, when this was immobilized on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> September”<sup>(110)</sup>.*

Montgomery collected remarks and justified with two reasons. First of all, I was not very satisfied with the training level of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army nor the means available; Secondly

*“I was not at all anxious to force Rommel to disengage and retreat in good order on the positions of el Agheila [!]. If we were to carry out the task, it was vital to ensure that Rommel remained in place to fight and then inflict a decisive defeat”<sup>(111)</sup>.*

You have to agree that Montgomery set and led his first battle with coldness, wise without any concession to the spectacular and triumphal arch. Not for nothing, in a circular issued on 7 September at the dependant commands, he remarked that *“you don't have to dance with the music of others”<sup>(112)</sup>*. Besides his best defender, if I may say so, Rommel was just a leader very much inclined by temperament to similar caution. Montgomery, he wrote, did well to give up a strong counterattack for the reconquest of the southern sector because he would probably not succeed. Leaving instead to take action the artillery and the air force would have dealt with the mass of maneuver of the AIT damage definitely exceed its losses and kept intact the power of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army.

The setback was heard by large commands and units of the axis troops. At the highest level were different reactions. Kesselring, for example, admitted that the disappointing result *“was for me a warning indicating the shipwreck of the whole of Africa campaign”<sup>(113)</sup>*, However, in those days he did not show such a confusion to Cavallero.

Indeed hinted at the possibility, desirable, an attack in which one *“could move to counterattack and then the offensive. Maybe having to do an offensive even without being ready at 100% because it may encourage political-military reasons”<sup>(114)</sup>*.

Cavallero saw the incident and its causes under a particular perspective and, to be honest, rather distorted:

*“Marxcashal Rommel announced that he had suspended the action because the supplies arrive badly and, apart from this fact, missed the surprise being come to a line prefixed by him on the evening of the 31<sup>st</sup> instead of in the morning. In addition, the Luftwaffe did not give the performance that was expected.. It is clear that for the third time there is disagreement between him and Marshal Kesselring”<sup>(115)</sup>*

However, in the days following the reality is offered to Rome without margin for misunderstandings. The first to speak was Mancinelli, on the



5<sup>th</sup> addressed to the Comando Supremo a very explicit telegram on the situation of the moment and the immediate future:

“Findings a situation at the AIT Command. Still not talked about it with Rommel, but not-say-no doubt agree wholeheartedly. Opportunity favorable for rapid conquest Egypt definitively lost. Prepare new operation will require at least three months, if sufficient forces are sent, media, logistics. In fact the German 22<sup>nd</sup> Division will begin transferring only the current month and will end (...?... ) a month at the pace of the 164<sup>th</sup>.

With overall optimism is considered instead whether English attack which indeed could unlock our favor current situation. This possibility considered unlikely, because in the current general difficulties contingencies Alamein position to represent British cheapest solution. Of course circumstances examined, which are local limited Theater of operations could be affected & also totally changed by developments Caucasus.

Rommel would be (...) in Europe for rest” <sup>(116)</sup>

Then it was the turn of Barbasetti. Who Rommel welcomed on the 7<sup>th</sup>, hurried to report back to Rome the essential points of the interview. It is the version of the German Marshal on recent events: the offensive had not achieved the expected success firstly because the enemy expecting, thanks to information by prisoners; the scope of the maneuver, intersected by vast tracts of mined areas and difficult areas feasibility had heavily slowed down the development of the plan; Since the second day the fuel crisis had appeared very serious; finally, English Aviation, had raged unabated bombing “hell”. From this crisis the AIT had honorably extricated by virtue of a “*wise retreat to positions appropriate*” and Rommel had taken two main teachings by events: absolute inappropriateness of undertaking offensive without the guarantee of supplies; inability to deal with the enemy with too great a difference in aviation, tanks and artillery. “*I had already done that in a situation where we were you could not do long-range operations,*” he added, however, Rommel, although without going into details. Ultimately, the offensive in the southern sector of the front was not more conceivable, given the extension of minefields and the material superiority of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the *Desert Air Force*. At the moment the only chance to keep was to take advantage of British minefields for defensive purposes, but to stay on the El Alamein line, “*which is now the definitive line in Africa*”, it was forced to employ advanced position also mobile troops. Once the motorized bodies were entirely collected in the rear, as the mass of maneuver, and the X and XX Corps had been further

reinforced, then would have been quiet on the positions of El Alamein in defensive attitude.

As for the British, had continued, there must be a frontal attack and their actions in the rear by means of parachute and *commando* units.

To resume the offensive the AIT needed one or two German divisions and as many Italian (the gun could remain guarding the rear line, but the *Pavia* had to return to the line), and an increase of aviation. It was also, and assured his Barbasetti commitment, build an entrenchment of positions for immediate rear, equip the *Folgore* of a greater number of anti-tank pieces and increase the potential, already satisfactory, of the Tobruk railway.

This was the gist of the interview, but Barbasetti not neglected any comments of the staff:

“a. The Marshal appeared full of disappointment for the facts occurred; eager almost a consensus, of an approval. Several times he asked for my thoughts. And in the end he added be his intention, as soon as the defensive front, consolidated travel to Rome and Berlin to talk *personally* with the Duce and the Führer, and *personally* explain their situation and the facts;

b. the narrative of the causes of the abandonment of the offensive appeared to me sometimes uncertain, sometimes secretive, sometimes conflicting, especially in the order of importance of the various causes. The Marshal has fallen into contradiction in describing his demeanor and his decisions;

c. is widespread, voice and accredited by several very reliable clues, what a contrast of opinions and consequent new strife, staff not always hidden, was born between Kesselring and Rommel before or during (or before *and* during) operations;

d. Indeed, German aviation was poor (as the amount of aircraft actually available), while the Italian - which was superior to the same availability of last May - has not been exploited by the German command in full, as if he and Rommel did not want to appeal strongly to aviation, which he considered a means under Kesselring's orders;

e. General Nehring, wounded by aircraft, Commander of the German armored Corps, and then well acquainted with real ideas of Rommel, said that was not the intention of the German command to launch major offensive, but only episode in forces that, if successful, would take great proportions;

f. at the XXI and X Corps, i.e. those engaged in only demonstrative actions, at the advanced part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet and at some element near Rommel himself [obvious reference to Mancinelli], there was complete given the explanation of the reasons for the withdrawal; the large units have not predicted so close as judgment could have them e.g. the XX Corps, who failed to accomplish in the time established the movements he ordered.

It is certain that the suspension of the offensive waiting and desired by the mass of

the troops, whatever the causes of suspension, was a disappointment for the troops themselves (...)”<sup>(117)</sup>.

The picture is now complete. Rommel, aware of inferiority and especially insecure for supplies, began the operation expecting not reluctantly great goals but ready to exploit any opportunity. Noted the failure of the move, he did not insist on what now was becoming a reckless undertaking. Symptomatic are the first two lines of a report that the Deleuse liaison officer information at the AIT command sent to his Bureau Chief: *"After the action, Rommel is back here at the command post [tactical] in high spirits, and as if you were freed by a nagging thought (...)"*<sup>(118)</sup>.

Cavallero was confused about the facts, but fell back to comment on the operational plan which he himself could not believe. To Gen. von Thoma, in passage to Rome to go to assume command of the DAK, replacing Nehring, envisaged roughly the situation in Egypt *"and put in evidence that, if we had one more Brigade in the recent action, we'd have arrived in Cairo. However, I have full confidence in a future victorious advance!"*<sup>(119)</sup>.

NOTES TO CHAPTER EIGHT

- 1 C. AUCHINLECK, Despatch, app. 21, p. 395 et seq. See C. BARNETT, op. cited above, app. B, p. 457 et seq.
- 2 A. BRYANT, op. cited above, p. 45.
- 3 W. CHURCHILL op. cited above, pp. 59-60.
- 4 Exchange there had been discussions and hesitations of various kinds, especially since the purge touched even the commanders of 9th Army (Gen. Wilson) and the 10<sup>th</sup> Army (Gen. Quinan). For the 8th Army Churchill cling on Gott, which Brooke had appeared tired and disheartened (A BRYANT, op. cited, p. 410 and seg.).
- 5 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 67. This sentence will cost a retraction to Churchill when, after the war, the text of the telegram was included in the first edition of the memoirs. Dorman-Smith, in fact, sued for defamation and Churchill agreed to insert a note clarifying in later editions (C. BARNETT, op. cited, pp. 338-339).
- 6 Ibid, p. 73.
- 7 Ibid, p. 78. In the first interview with Alexander, Churchill expressed his regret for the exoneration of Auchinleck with touching words: "It's like killing a magnificent stag"! (H. ALEXANDER, 1940-1945, Garzanti, Milano, 1963, p. 19).
- 8 F.H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, pp. 408-409 and F. WINTERBOTHAM, op. cited above, pp. 87-89.
- 9 A. BRYANT, op. cited above, p. 439. Feedback relevance of Montgomery, it is interesting to compare with the reminder of Dorman-Smith.
- 10 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, p. 131.
- 11 H. ALEXANDER: op. cited above, p. 29.
- 12 BERNARD L. MONTGOMERY, *Da El Alamein al fiume Sangro*, Garzanti, Milan 1950, p. 5.
- 13 J. CONNELL, op. cited above, p. 716 and C. BARNETT, op. cited above, pp. 344-345. The Publisher of the memoirs of Montgomery in later editions included a clarifying note (C. BARNETT, op. cited, app. A).
- 14 H. ALEXANDER, op. cited above, p. 33.
- 15 Ibid, p. 34.
- 16 Ibid, p. 34.
- 17 H. ALEXANDER, Despatch on *The African Campaign from El Alamein to Tunis from 10<sup>th</sup> August 1942 to 13<sup>th</sup> May*, Supplement to the London Gazette of February 5, 1948, p. 841.
- 18 H. ALEXANDER, memoirs. CIT, p. 32.
- 19 H. KIPPENBERGER, op. cited above, p. 180.
- 20 measures designed to preserve the secrecy of the *Ultra* were strictly respected. The situations and known movements through the decryption of German *Enigma* messages were immediately covered by sending reconnaissance aircraft, whose arrival in the affected area would cause the axis Commands to attribute intervention the discovery of a convoy in the Mediterranean and the concentration of troops in North Africa.
- 21 F. H. HINSLEY, op. cited above, pp. 411-412.
- 22 For the naval battle of mid August refer essentially to G. FIORAVANZO, op. cited above, p. 350 et seq.; A. SANTONI and f. MAGU, op. cited above, p. 233 et seq.; G. SANTORO, op. cited above, p. 396 et seq.; I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited above, p. 316 et seq.
- 23 DSCS, f. 31900/0p. 12.8.1942-date Annex No. 31.
- 24 A. TEDDE, op. cited above, p. 286. Teddedice also that Cavallero headed Bastico a personal letter resigning from every position and that the rejected Cavallero stating to be him, and not judge and referee, Bastico. A letter like that do not figure in any historical diaries and Supreme command of Superlibia nor in the diary then Cavallero, inclined to believe most likely have manifested this intention Bastico confidentially and that Cavallero had deterred easily with obvious arguments.

25 Diary Cavallero.

26 G. SANTORO, op. cited above, p. 282.

27 Ibid, p. 285.

28 see SANTONI and MATTESINI, op. cited above, p. 227. ,

29 August 12 then Rommel did represent the Higher the possibility that Command the convoy sighted in the Eastern Mediterranean is interested in a landing at Tobruk or Sollum-Marsa Matruh. For this, also considered the possibility of a simultaneous attack. land on the front of El Alamein, Rommel dispose moving the 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn to Sollum and Matruh to 580<sup>th</sup> Recon Bn and held ready a tactical group formed with a motorized Regiment and the recon group of XX Corps.

30 MARCANTONIO BRAGADIN, The Italian Navy drama, Mondadori, Milano 1982, pp. 217-218.

31 G. SANTORO, op. cited above, p. 413.

32 Ibid, p. 417.

33 see ds. G. FLORAVANZO, op. cited above, p. 361.

34, relating to DSCS f. 13156/serve. date of 15.8.1942 CSFAAS.

35 22 July then the Comando Superiore had submitted to the Comando Supremo a minimum program for large units reordering in line, asking the following newly established organic units: four battalions and three groups from 100/17 for the *Pavia*; two battalions and three groups for the *Brescia* 75/27; two battalions and a group if mobile for *Trieste*; a battalion and a group from 100/17 for the *Bologna*; a group from 100/17 for *Trento*, three self-propelled groups for the *Ariete* and the *Littorio*, two battalions 9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and for one for the 7<sup>th</sup>. Overall 6,500 infantrymen and gunners, 6,000 to transport by air, while the material could be posted on cargo ships. Considering an influx of 300 men per day would have occurred 40 days from start of departures from Italy.

Also the Comando Superiore had asked 24,000 complements. But in practice little of everything arrived in Libya.

36 in order to somehow inconvenience of unpreparedness and failure, the Comando Superiore amalgam had established special education centers (one of infantry, one artillery, one tank and one of the engineers) for short but intense training cycles, particularly forms of combat-oriented in Africa. Also held courses for officers, non-commissioned officers and specialists, thereby compensating for most the shortcomings viewed.

37 as an example of “mistakes” that occurred, you can quote a letter sent on August 9 by the command above the Supreme Command. It recalled that the Barbasetti 6 April earlier had asked the staff only to two groups from 100/17 (one for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Quick and one for the 250<sup>th</sup> artillery of the *Bologna*). This personnel is now rushing to “the motherland” informed Barbasetti. However the losses resulting from the battle of Ain el Gazala, the capture of Tobruk and battle of El Alamein had made inevitable the use of all the material set aside for the establishment of two groups (24 howitzers from 100/17, battery equipment, and motor vehicles). Result: “Among the short, therefore, you will have in N.A. all staff for two groups of 100 without having the pieces, vehicles and other materials required” (DSCSAS, f./03 10378 D.M. date 9.8.1942).

38 On 10 August Rommel wrote in his diary: “Kesselring was here yesterday. We agreed on the future. Now it comes to make full use of [these] a few weeks to be ready. The situation is changing day to day in my favor” (B.H. LIDDELL HART, The Rommel Papers cited above, p. 263).

39 DSCSAS, f. 01/16663/Op. date 14.8.1942- Annex No. 32.

40 Cavallero stated not with people who wanted to take it, but it is clear that the phrase was said with intention, that von Rintelen the referring to Rommel.

41 Diary Cavallero, date 13.8.1942. They day before Cavallero had anticipated to Rommel that the AIT, starting at 16, would be passed directly to the Comando Supremo. Set, then the posterior margin of the area of jurisdiction of the Matruh alignment-Siwa, warned: “the Duce confirms the General guidelines in place and adds that the deployment and all predispositions, including logistics, should correspond to a speedy completion of the ongoing preparations for the resumption. The time for this recovery will be determined by the Duce” (DSCS f. 32000/Op. date 12.8.1942).

- 42 DAVIDSON, cited f. 31300/Op. date 26.6.1942- Annex No. 23.
- 43 DAVIDSON, f. 300 date 17.8.1942- Annex No. 33.
- 44 see E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, pp. 213-217.
- 45 Diary Cavallero, date 18.8.1942.
- 46 see G. MANCINELU, op. cited above, pp. 158-159, and E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, pp. 216-217.
- 47 DSCS, tele/Op 32076. date 18.8.1942, at 21:00, addressed to Delesee for Mar Cavallero..
- The decision was taken at the meeting on Transport held at the Comando Supremo that morning. In this meeting the Adm. Weichold had expressed the opinion that the suspension of traffic for three days would not have landed anything in that would not disappear British submarines, and instead had asked to “insist” at all costs in sending supplies to Libya. The Adm. Sansonetti had closed the debate arguing that the escort were insufficient and that the lost ships could not replace.
- 48 DSCS, s.n., tele 19.8.1942 date command AIT 10:05 hours, addressed to Gen. Von Rintelen.
- 49 DSCS, tele/32103 Op. date 21.8.1942.
- 50 DSCS, f.n. 85 date 22.8.1942, hours 20:35-Annex No. 34.
- 51 In August actually landed in Libya about 52,000 tons. all types of materials (including fuels and armored vehicles), of which 13,000 between 24 and 31 August. In the same month the enemy received 450 cannons, 390 tanks, 6,700 vehicles and 72,000 tons of other war material.
- 52 In August on average 50 British bombers bombed Tobruk each night, minor ports and ships at anchor (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, op. cited, p. 379).
- 53 DAVIDSON, f. 31132/Op. date 23.8.1942- Annex No. 35.
- 54 Diary Cavallero, date 23.8.1942.
- 55 Diary Cavallero, date 23.8.1942.
- 56 actually with Gen. Guderian was still in disgrace. Commander 4<sup>th</sup> Army on the Russian front, had a violent confrontation with the sea. von Kluge, his direct superior, following which he was sacked from his post and placed in reserve.
- 57 On August 24, Rommel wrote to his wife that he was a bit *“better and that certainly will not leave my place until I can move my hand to my successor with no worries. No word yet on who will be (...). The rate at which we are wearing out the generals in Africa - five division in eighteen months - it is no wonder that at some point I need a command”* (BH LIDDELL HART, Rommel Papers cit., P. 270).
- 58 letter of Leut. Berndt, aide-de-camp to the Marshal, to Mrs. Rommel on 26.8.1942 (ibid., p. 271).
- 59 DSCS, tele 306/Sit. date: 26.8.1942, 23.15 hours of Delesee.
- 60 B.H. LIDDELL HART, Rommel Papers cited above, p. 272
- 61 The other three tankers scheduled, the *S. Andrea* will be burned down by British aircraft the 30<sup>th</sup>, while still in the Gulf of Taranto; the *Abruzzi*, hit by a torpedo on September 10 will be left adrift, will lose some of the load, but the rest will be recovered; the *Picci Fazio* will be sunk on 2 September.
- 62 DSCS, f. 28.8.1942 date of Delesee 3963-Annex No. 36.
- 63 DSCS, 104 tele/Segr. 29.8.1942 date of the command AIT.
- 64 reported by Bayerlein, vds. B.h. LIDDELL HART, Rommel Papers cited above, p. 275.
- 65 Historical Journal XX Corps, date 22.8.1942.
- 66, the provisions in question are listed in recent directives issued by De Stefanis for three divisions of the XX Corps, after the report of Rommel. You then feel that they have formed the subject of attention from the AIT Commander (Diary of the XX Corps, f. 0p/3499.29.8.1942 date).
- 67 The *Pavia* Inf. Div. consisted of: Division Command and 27<sup>th</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> infantry with two battalions, 26th artillery with three groups, XVII mixed battalion genius.

- 68 The *Pistoia* Inf. Div. consisted of: Division command, 35<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> infantry and 3<sup>rd</sup> artillery. By the time the 35<sup>th</sup> infantry had arrived with three battalions, elements of the 36<sup>th</sup> infantry and a artillery group.
- 69 The *Giovani Fascisti* Arm. Div. had nothing except armored name and a vague intention of the Central Authorities. It was formed in late May 1942 with GG. FF. battalions (which had already fought at Bir el Gobi in December 1941), became the regiment on August 30. Among the few other existing units were the III armored car group *Monferrato* and two M 14 tanks, unique armored items. 23 August them one battalion was sent by plane to occupy the Siwa Oasis and on 1 September will arrive the rest of the Division.
- 70 The 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. was organically composed of: Division Command, 125<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 382<sup>nd</sup> and 433<sup>rd</sup> infantry three infantry battalions, 220<sup>th</sup> with two artillery groups, 220<sup>th</sup> Recon Bn, 220<sup>th</sup> pioneer battalion, 609<sup>th</sup> anti-aircraft battalion, minor units and services.
- 71 The *Bologna* Inf. Div. consisted of: Division Command, 39<sup>th</sup> infantry with three battalions, 40<sup>th</sup> infantry with two battalions, 205<sup>th</sup> artillery with four groups, the XXV engineer battalion.
- 72 On 1 August the parachute Division had assumed the name of 185<sup>th</sup> *Folgore* Inf. Div.: Division Command, 185<sup>th</sup> Infantry (II, III and IV battalion), 186<sup>th</sup> infantry (V, VI and VII battalion), 187<sup>th</sup> infantry (IX and X battalion), 185<sup>th</sup> with two artillery groups 47/32, VIII pioneer battalion, minor units and services. Since the 185<sup>th</sup> infantry command remained in with the Italy with the I and III battalion of the *Nembo* Division, the grouping of the II and IV battalion (Leut. Col. Bechi Luserna), posted to Egypt in the first echelon, was initially autonomous.
- 73 The Recon grouping of XX Corp was formed by the III *Nizza* armored car group, VIII Bersaglieri battalion and one armored car 88 battery.
- 74 B.H. LIDDELL HART, *The Tanks*, cit., p. 215. According to Carver British tanks were 945, of which 772 supplied by frontline units (efficient 693). Alexander considered only 13<sup>th</sup> Corp availability: 300 medium tanks, 80 light plus a hundred of 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd.
- 75 XX Corps had left them under the X body XXXVII/9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and XII/8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, deployed respectively in the North-East and South-East of Gabel Kalakh, six batteries of various caliber and two companies of *Trieste*, for deficiency of motor vehicles. This, in addition to the XXVIII/9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and III/8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri A/T., already placed in Bab el Qattara. On this occasion, it is worth to bring a record of Gen. Ceriana Mayneri recorded in his personal diary on August 30: "*my Chief of G. S Colonel Scala is transferred unexpectedly (It is the last straw! is inconceivable at this time such a transferred by our Superiore Command at the Intendenza N.A.)*" (C. CERIANA MAYNERI, op. cited, p. 120).
- 76 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 222.
- 77 P. CARELL, op. cited above, pp. 427-428.
- 78 H. ALEXANDER, *D'El Alamein à Tunis et à la Sicile*, Lavauzelle, Paris 1949, p. 24. The map of the original and practicability are rigged by Francis de Guingand in Operation Victory, Hodder and Stoughton, pp. 1144 and 147.
- 79 F. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, p. 175.
- 80 At about 01:00 of 31 August Gen. Kippenberger, commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade well placed to defend Alam Nayil, such was notified that the Axis troops had begun to force the southern minefields. He also heard gunfire further north, in the direction of Ruweisat, but the thing, at least for the moment, could not involve him. He reflected and concluded that the brigade was ready. "*So I went back to sleep - he wrote later - and sleep well, as for the rest of the night our pieces continue endlessly to beat the gaps in minefields*" (H. KIPPENBERGER, op. Cited above, p. 206).
- 81 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 225.
- 82 F. VON MELLENTHIN, op. cited above, pp. 175-176.
- 83 D. YOUNG, op. cited above, p. 232.
- 84 Historical Journal XX Corps date 1.9.1942.
- 85 Commander of the *Littorio* noted in his diary: "*to our surprise and disappointment, about 17 hours [?] while we are going to shoot at it, having everything set up for this purpose, the inexplicable order to suspend the attack itself and to strengthen our position*" (C.CERIANA MAYNERI, op. citata" p. 122).

- 86 DAVIDSON, tele/32198 Op. date 29.8.1942, hours 22.
- 87 Historical Journal, Delease tele 1/2656/SM, 16.30 hours date 1.9.1942, of the Intendenza N.A.  
Can affect an observation made by Supermarina: to send a destroyer with 50 ton. gasoline in drums they consumed 400 tons. of fuel oil.
- 88 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 227.
- 89 According to British sources, a column of the 4<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> Hussars surprises in the morning a few vehicles 300 kilometres east of Qaret el Himeimat, destroying 57. Since the XX Corps reported a raid against the transport of the *Trieste* with eleven vehicles destroyed or damaged, the evaluation of the 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. was exaggerated or had been attacked at the same time the means of the DAK.
- 90 C. CERIANA MAYNERI., op. cited above, pp. 122-123.
- 91 DSCS, f. 107/Segr. 2.9.1942 date, 22.30 hours, Gen. Mancinelli-Annex No. 37.
- 92 Diary Cavallero, date 2.9.1942.
- 93 DSCS, tele/Op 32249. 3.9.1942 date, at 13.55.
- 94 Were part of ongoing investigations about the episode Delease transportation range, which arrived with 350 tons. diesel fuel, had unloaded only 120.
- 95 Gen. Clifton who confessed to Rommel's own mortification of being captured by the Italians, so much more, he said, he had been about to induce the *Folgore* paratroopers to surrender, claiming the presence of strong British armored units in the immediate vicinity. It would have indeed succeeded in his work of persuasion, he continued, had it not appeared a German officer to frustrate his intent (E. ROMMEL, *op. cited*, pp. 228-229).  
Actually the presence of a German officer on site is pure fantasy and Italian officer who stopped Clifton spoke English well and retorted that the paratroopers were there to fight and immediately escort the Brigadier instead to the 187<sup>th</sup> Inf. commander... Col. Camosso - that will be a few hours later wounded in a action with remaining isolated New Zealand elements and hidden on the rear of the Italian lines - was informed of the capture from your runner, who told him that "*out there there's a guy with a cap of a stationmaster*". There and then silenced the Camosso runner, but then he was in the red band typical of British generals caps and then understood and met Clifton. "*He also said to me the nonsense that he had said to the others-later commented on-but I had no time to lose; I replied that he was a prisoner in the meantime of Italian paratroopers and sent back by Ramke*"
- 96 The 65<sup>th</sup> infantry company, remained surrounded, resists in place up to 04:00 of 4 September, then opened a hole and moved on with 39 Regimental survivors.
- 97 M. CARVER, the battle of El Alamein, Baldini Castaldi, and Milan 1964, p. 114.
- 98 B. MONTGOMERY, Memoirs, Collins, London 1958, p. 110.
- 99 Delease historical Diary, f. 2686/Sit. date 26.9.1942.
- 100 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 231.
- 101 Ibid, p. 230.
- 102 DSCS, f. 32450/ Segr. date 15.9.1942.
- 103 DSCS, 32470/Op. date 17.9.1942, at 12.30.
- 104 DSCS, f. B/ 11566 of Superaereo date 10.8.1942.
- 105 DSCS, tele 32470/Op. date 17.9.1942, at 12.30.
- 106 A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 180.
- 107 G. MANCINELLI, op. cited above, p. 169.
- 108 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 221.
- 109 A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 131.
- 110 F. VON MELLENTIN, op. cited above, p. 177.
- 111 B. MONTGOMERY, Memoirs, p. 110.
- 112 M. CARVER, op. cited above, p. 118.
- 113 A. KESSELRING, op. cited above, p. 131.
- 114 Diary Cavallero, date 7.9.1942.



115 *Ibid*, date 4.9.1942.

116 Delaese historical Diary (DSD), tele 4094, date 5.9.1942, 12 hours, Gen. Mancinelli. No message was addressed to the Supreme Command and, for information, to Delesee.

Immediately, Barbasetti inviting Mancinelli intervened to refrain in the future from initiatives of this kind and to turn before him “*which I also have other possibly conflicting items with those and you collected*” (DSD, tele 1373/Sit date 5.9.1942, hours 21.50).

Of course replies hotly laying Mancinelli in evidence that it was limited to envisage with Rommel's loyalty, and concluding it would be mortifying for him that said he could be thought better and more accurately known five hundred kilometers away from the face of him who lived next to marshal the days of battle (G. MANCINELLI, op. cited , p. 165).

As for Cavallero, about ten days after he did express to your satisfaction with Mancinelli “*news, forecasts and appreciations in the recent period*”, provided in the recent operation period and the confirmation to continue in the report of correspondence with the Supreme Command “*from which you directly*” (DAVIDSON, f. 32444/0p. date 15.9.1942).

117 DSD, f. SD/37, 8.9.1942 date of Barbasetti to Cavallero.

118 DSD, personal memo to Chief Information Office 8.9.1942 date. Diary

119 Diary Cavallero, 11. 9.1942.

## THE THIRD BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

## 1. THE OPERATION LIGHTFOOT.

Friday, October 23 passed the ACIT as an ordinary day, waiting a little bored for the enemy offensive that eventually would come. On the position of resistance aligned itself an order of the cornerstones of the battalion, all of whom had posted to a security zone company, leaning against the outer mined end. A second set of pillars did not exist. There was just some units in location rearward, mostly oriented to plug leaks.

For the infantry of the British 30<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Corps passed so slowly exhausting, as they lay motionless in the starting points occupied quietly into the night before. At dusk the 8<sup>th</sup> Army came out of their holes and the narrow trenches that had engulfed the whole day and completed the final preparations: the hot mess, the lighting of corridors through its minefields, reaching the line Starting in the no man's land by the battalions in the first echelon, airfield lighting that submissions contained the advanced positions by the influx of units in the second echelon and the entire 10<sup>th</sup> Corp, and then delivering the fire data to the chief gunner, control of personal equipment.

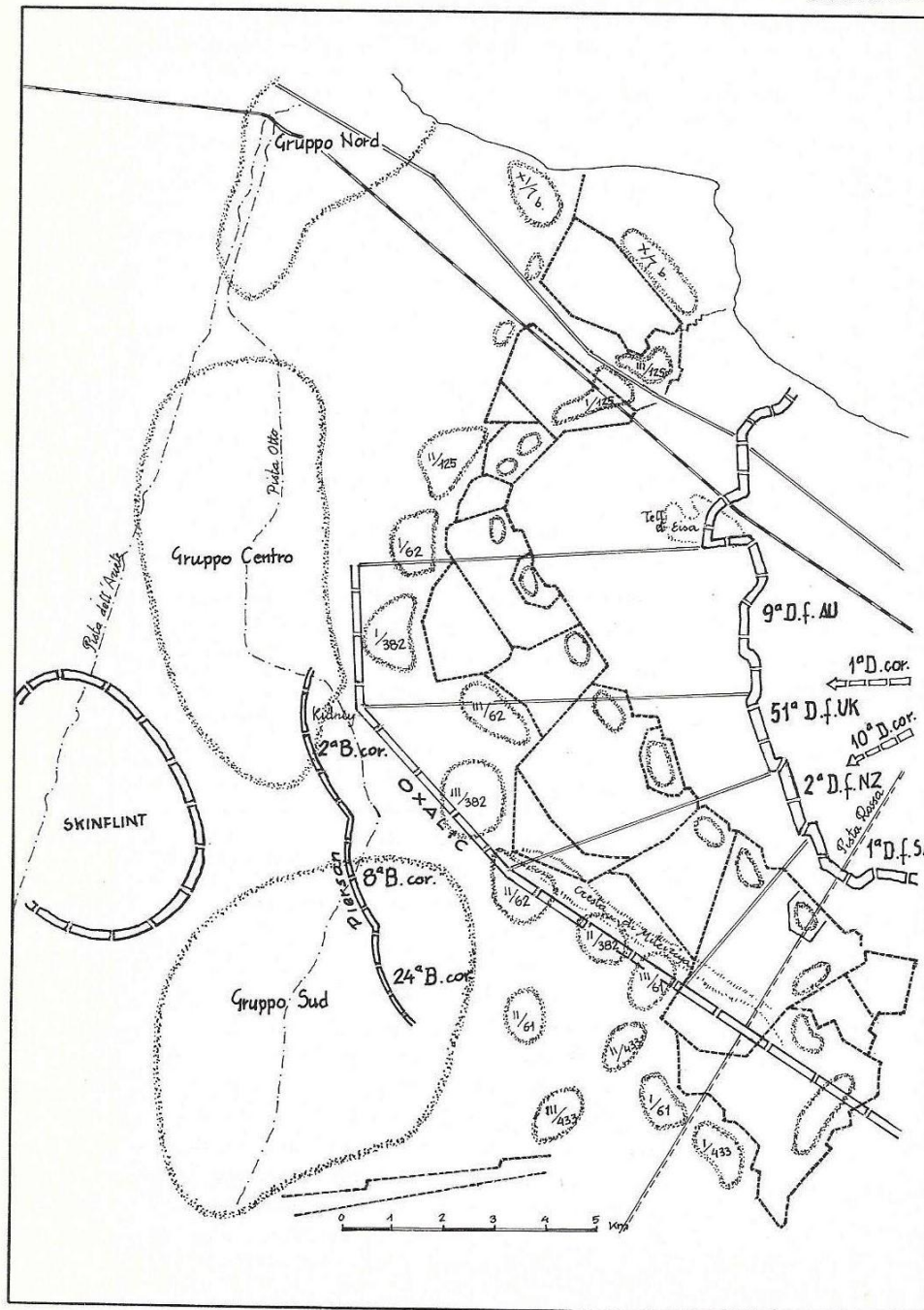
At 20:40 Italian time, or 21:40 hours local, on a front of about 60 kilometers, the horizon in front of the German-Italian lines flared suddenly, while a hurricane of fire pounding of artillery was taken down on the sides and showered on the cornerstones of the defense. Hidden by the clouds, 48 RAF bombers dropped in turn 125 tons of bombs on the device of the axis.

The task of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp was breaking through the lines of the Italian XXI Corps south of Tell el Eisa, build before 02:10 of the 24<sup>th</sup> a bridgehead over the position of strength before dawn and allowing the passage of the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Corp. The front edge of the bridgehead, called *Oxalic*, came to the small depression called oddly enough *Kidney Ridge* and ran on the southern slopes of the hill of Miteiriya (sketch n. 82). The 10<sup>th</sup> Corp was to overcome *Oxalic* by dawn, reaching the Pierson line, and there reorder. In a second phase, according to the trend of the fight, it would advance

The plan of attack of British 30<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Corps

IL PIANO DI ATTACCO  
DEL 30° A 10° CORPO BRITANNICO

Schizzo n. 82



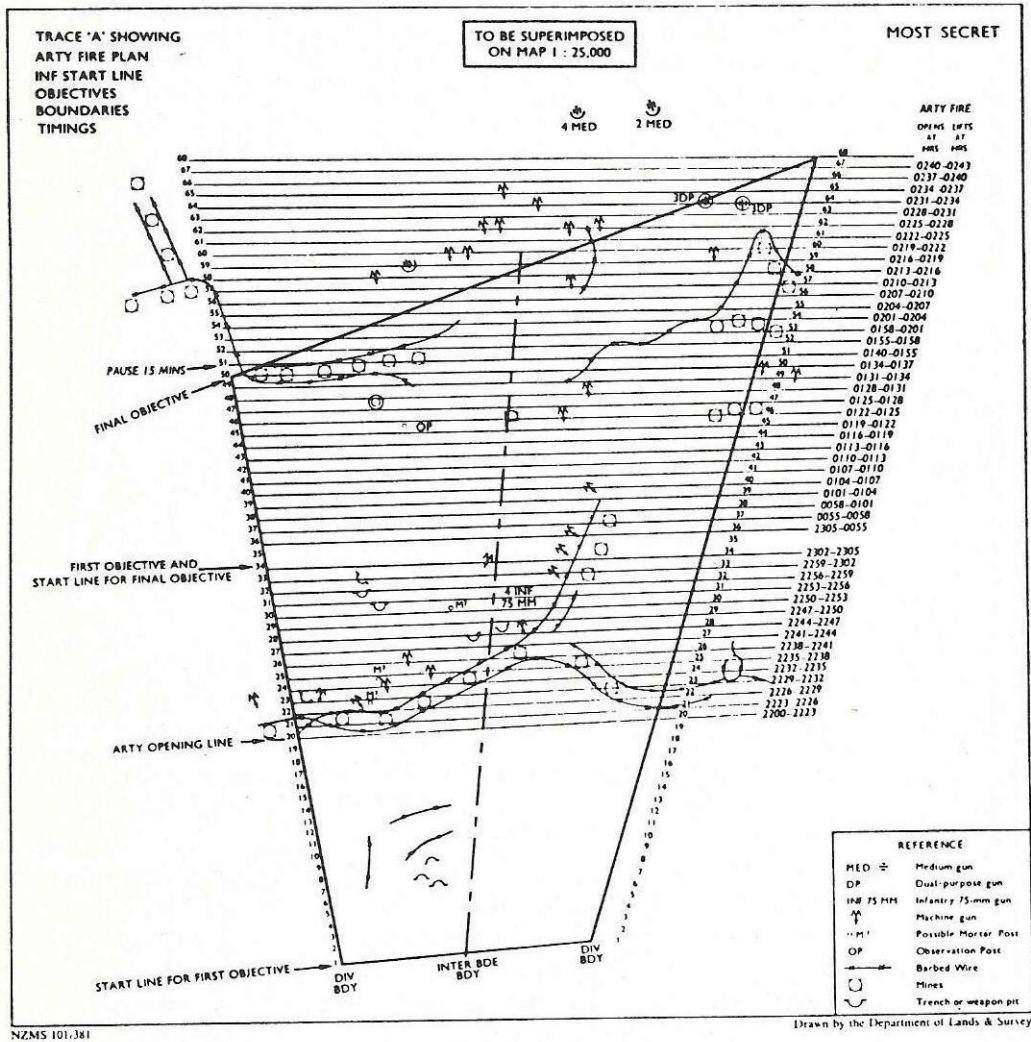
for another five or six kilometers to occupy the *Skinflint* area, south of Tell el Aqqaqir, astride the Rahman track of the *Ariete*. The fulfillment of these tasks was the premise to proceed to the crumbling of static defenses (30<sup>th</sup> Corp) and to allow this without interference from the reserves of the axis (10<sup>th</sup> Corps). On the ten-kilometer area from attack, Leese had amassed two Australian brigades, three Scots, three New Zealanders and three South Africa with five armored regiments. In total, 30,000 men supported by 320 tanks and supported by 450 pieces of artillery against 6-7,000 soldiers and some 260 field pieces (including armored reserves area) Italy and Germany.

A part of the protagonist, the initial one, was given to the British batteries, responsible for soften the static structures and then to facilitate the progression of the infantry. The shot preparation was therefore very violent and lasted a quarter of an hour, from 20:40 to 20:55. Enough to inflict serious losses to the defenders and especially to upset the artillery and the broadcast network of the ACIT, resulting in delays in the adoption of countermeasures.

The zero hour for the start of the attack was set at 21:00. From 20:55 to 21:00 the guns fell silent. When they resumed firing the shot headed for seven minutes on the advanced Italian-German positions, then passed to a program for the support that was to last until dawn. This support took the overall appearance of concentrations of successive goals to set time, but in New Zealand took the form of mobile curtain moving it forward every three minutes (see. Figure next page).

The four divisions moved in line, each with two brigades in the first row. The depth of up to *Oxalic* ranged from eight kilometers to the Australians to five South Africans and was marked by reference lines and intermediate targets. Maintaining the direction it was facilitated by gusts of tracers fired by Bofors gunner at the sector limits of the brigade, while spotlights threw their beams of light against the sky to reduce the effects of dust that was taking possession of the battlefield. As you can easily detect, sectors and directions of attack were indicated in a straight line, regardless of the disposition of the static structures identified and the performance of the minefields. In the desert, where the forms of the terrain were not likely to present tactical routes worthy of attention, and the attack was intended to act as a steamroller all overwhelming, and at night, where even easier that day was lost wasting precious time, was attributed maxim

RIPRODUZIONE DEL LUCIDO PER  
L'APPOGGIO DI ARTIGLIERIA  
NEL SETTORE NEO ZELANDESE



N.B.: La riproduzione è tratta da R. Walter, op. citata, p. 234

importance to measures to facilitate the regularity of advanced brigades. In this framework, the progression in a straight line via the tactic became easier to follow and to delimit with tracers.

The 9<sup>th</sup> Australia Inf. Div. was the right of the line of attack. With the 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade engaged the German I and III/125<sup>th</sup> Inf. straddling the coastal roadway fooled the defense; with the 26<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> advanced south of Tell el Eisa (sketch n. 83), taking care at the same time protecting the exposed side with the divisional cavalry regiment, anti-tank guns, machine gunners and pioneers. The 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade that was acting in a very limited sector, swept the third co. of the I/62<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, isolated the 5<sup>th</sup> of the II/125<sup>th</sup> Infantry and went without any more contrasts the cornerstone of the I/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf.. The fight did not last long, as the unchallenged operated by English artillery pounding, and in a few hours the goal was practically achieved. However, a company I/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. managed to move to the north and join with the II/125<sup>th</sup> Inf.. The 20<sup>th</sup> brigade repulsed the second co. of the German I/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf., it destroyed the 11<sup>th</sup> cp. the I/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf., but encountered a few bumps in the final stage: it counted on the aid of the 40<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* to break the position of strength, but the tanks were tethered in the minefields, resulting in a dangerous detachment, however in the end the tanks arrived, also managed to smash the I/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and to bring about a kilometer from the objective. Here come, Morshead had also regretted that the line of *Oxalic* did not lend itself to a convenient consolidation, therefore, resolved to backup the two brigades of a thousand meters.

The 51<sup>st</sup> Inf. Div. had a major undertaking, as the amplitude of *Oxalic* was almost double the base, which produced some divergence in the efforts, and the two topographic points most important in the area - the *Kidney* and hill 30 on the north-west of the ridge of Miteiriya were precisely on the edge of the external sector and the objective (sketch n. 84).

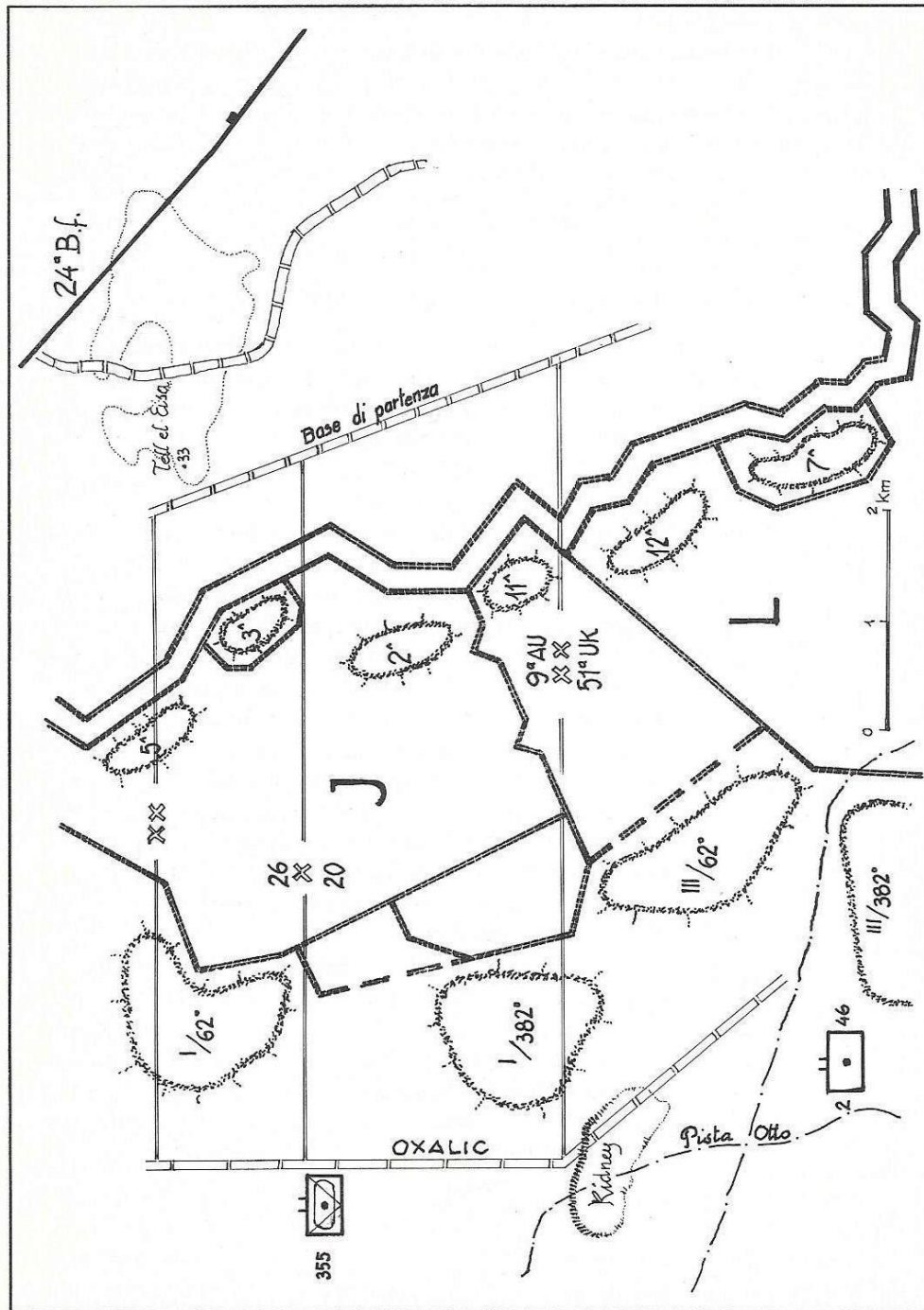
To the right, in the sub sector of the III/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf., Moved the 153<sup>rd</sup> brigade with a squadron of *Valentine*, left, against the III/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf., advancing the 154<sup>th</sup> Brigade with the bulk of the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*; the starting point had been the 152<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, ready to intervene. The five battalions in the first echelon of the Highlanders they penetrated into minefields to sound shrill and wailing of the bagpipes. Unlike the Australians, they immediately encountered a strong resistance by advanced companies and especially a large interdiction fire and a nearby barrier. The disruption and delays caused sensitive losses, by the difficulty of getting light in minefields, confusion, meant that at dawn the division had not obtained the



The attack of the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Div. night on 24 October

L'ATTACCO DELLA 9<sup>a</sup> D.F. AUSTRALIANA  
LA NOTTE SUL 24 OTTOBRE

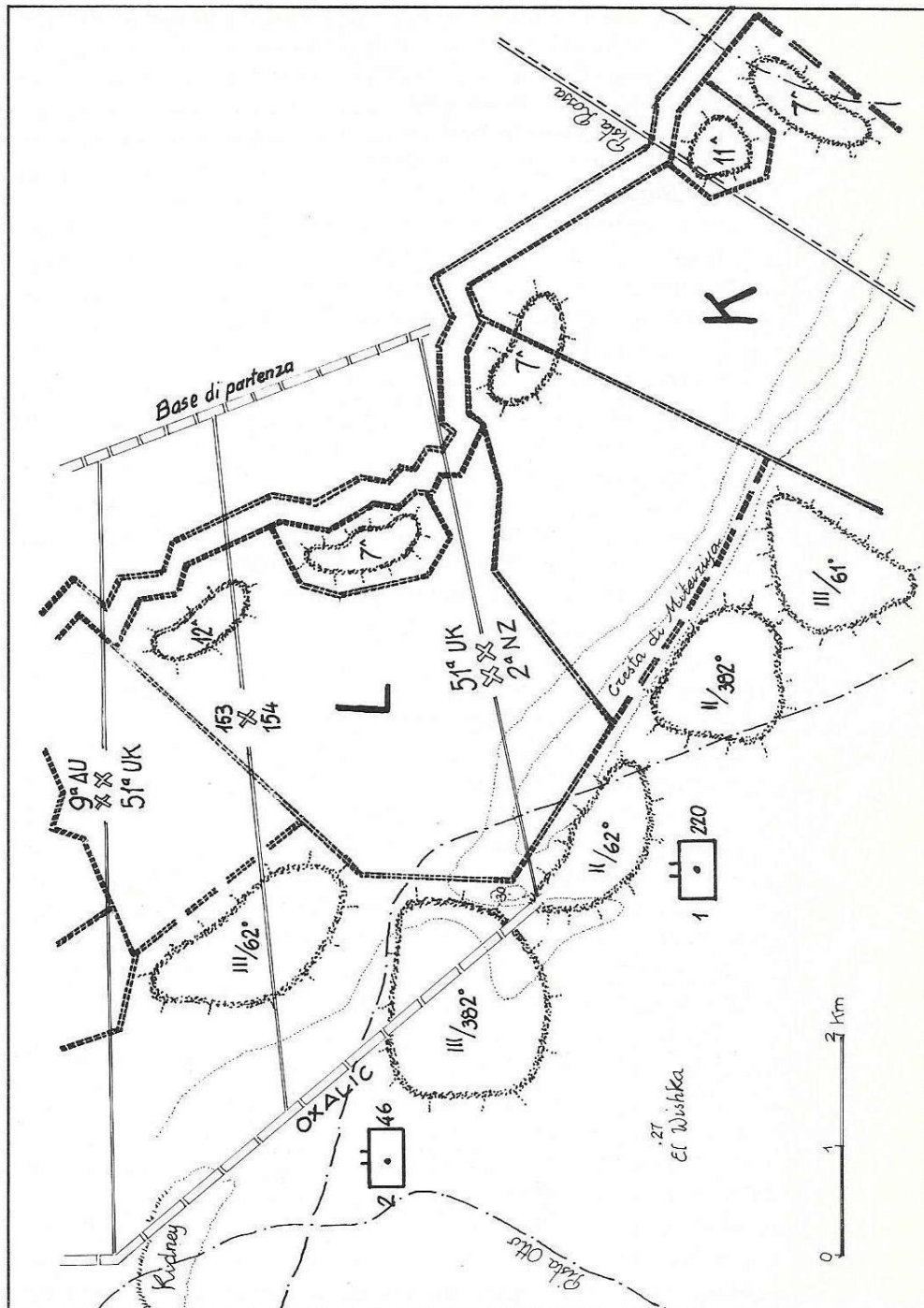
Schizzo n. 83



The attack of 51<sup>st</sup> Highlanders Inf. Div. night on October 24

L'ATTACCO DELLA 51<sup>a</sup> D.F. HIGHLANDERS  
LA NOTTE SUL 24 OTTOBRE

Schizzo n. 84





expected results. The III/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and III/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. held out; the only exception cited was hill 30, on the left, conquered by the decimated VII Battalion of the *Black Watch* after a fierce battle with a company of the II/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. at 3 am.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div. had to overcome the western ridge of Miteiriya to achieve the goal (sketch n. 85). Freyberg was not worried of the possibility of missing the stretch of *Oxalic* assigned to him, but that should not remain sufficient at night for the opening of the gates. So the watchword was: speed. The division went on the attack with the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade on the right and the 6<sup>th</sup> on the left; They followed the 9<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade and the divisional cavalry regiment. New Zealanders were opposed to 7<sup>th</sup> co. of II/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. in the security zone and the three cornerstones of the II/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf., III/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. on the position of resistance.

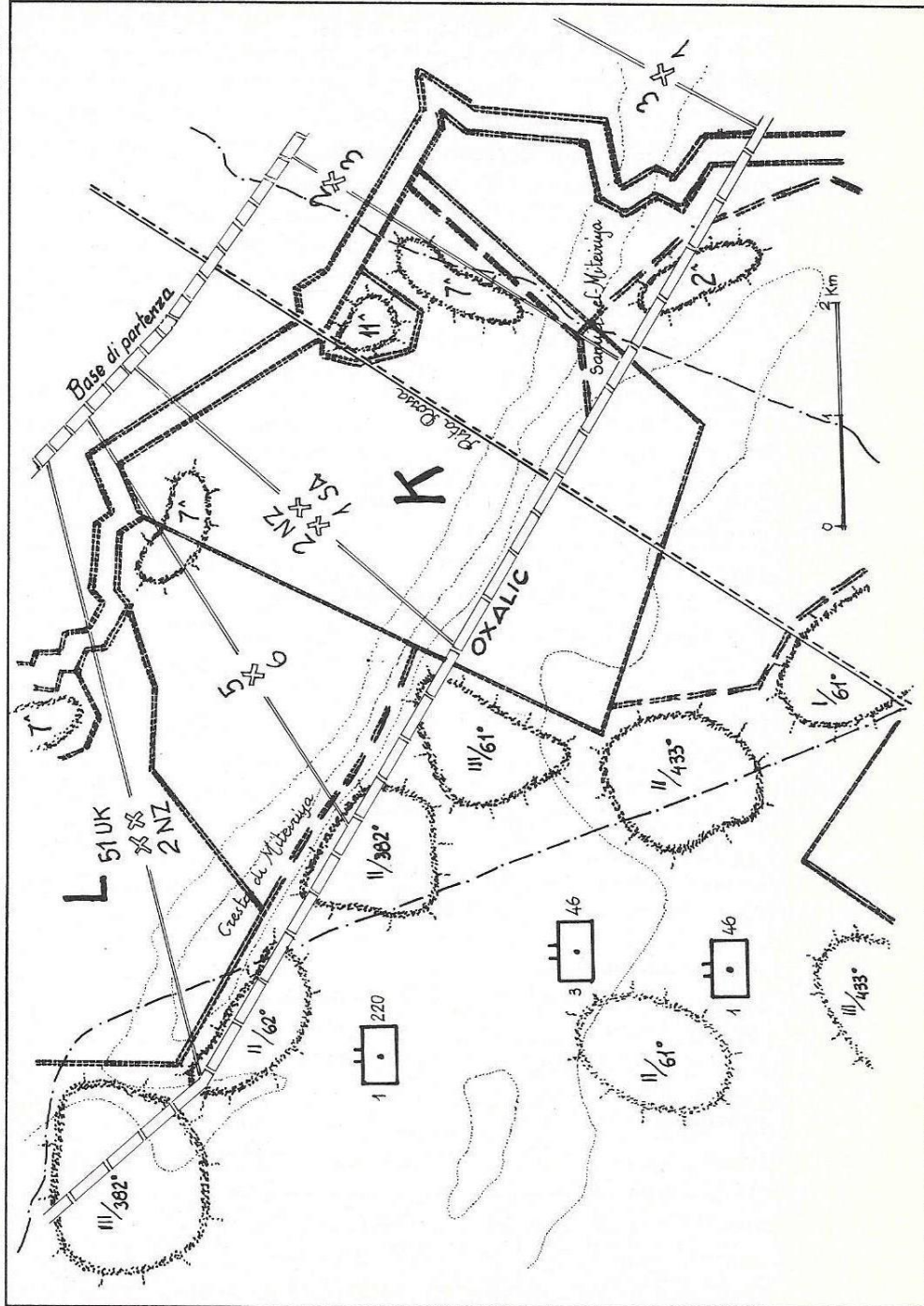
The advance of the battalions in the first echelon, behind the curtain of the mobile artillery, took place in such difficult radio communications that, as the reference line intermediate had been duly passed at the scheduled time, the news was confirmed to Freyberg only at 2am. The action against the crest of Miteiriya was violent and bloody because, contrary to expectations, the minefields were still on the sunny ridge with disastrous consequences for the tanks of the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., that now preceded the infantry. However aggression Zealand allowed to overwhelm the last obstacles and at 03:00, with some delay on the program, most of *Oxalic* was occupied and *Scorpions* and the minesweepers could accelerate the remediation work. The disappointment of Freyberg for losses in tanks was acute. In fact, the means of the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. (*Sherman*, *Grant* and *Crusader*, a squadron of each type for regiment) could be used for the conquest of *Oxalic* "at the cost of all loss," but not launched on the minefields if not accompanying the infantry; also it was necessary that a significant proportion of them were available to respond to an armored counterattack surely the enemy would launched at dawn.

The 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa Inf. Div. had all three brigades in the front row, but only 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> were involved in the occupation of *Oxalic* (sketch n. 85). They moved confidently, supported by the 8<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*. Considering the device of defense, their task appeared to be relatively simple: the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade was in the safety zone 11<sup>th</sup> cp. of the III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. and 7<sup>th</sup> cp. II/433<sup>rd</sup> Inf. the 3<sup>rd</sup> had to overcome the 2<sup>nd</sup> cp. I/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. directly on *Oxalic* and nothing else. So the difficulties were limited. Instead the South Africans went to meet

r The attack of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div on night of 24 October

L'ATTACCO DELLA 2<sup>a</sup> D.F. NEOZELANDESE  
LA NOTTE SUL 24 OTTOBRE

Schizzo n. 85



a nasty surprise. The identification of the Italian-German cornerstones did not correspond fully to reality and this led to a series of chain drawbacks. On the right, some units were suddenly involved in chaotic fighting and suffered heavy losses; consequently the level of artillery fire received quick adaptations that increased the confusion; minefields ignored the existence of which was added other reasons for delay or inconvenience. Basically, at dawn only the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade had occupied their part of the objective, on the far left of the field of action, but the division was not able to continue.

A little further south, beyond the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Brigade, 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Div had correctly carried out its task of engaging with a vigorous diversionary action the Ruweisat sector, held by the *Bologna*.

The sudden entry into action of the British batteries at 20:40 against strongholds and deployments of artillery, had been brought home to the Command of the XXI Corp. most likely was "down to it." The surprise sought by the enemy with the sudden opening of the fire after a day absolutely flat, the width of the battling front, the extraordinary violence of the fire unprecedented on the chessboard, gave to January Gloria assured the start of "*the offensive operations in great style which for days the Army Command and Information Service had informed Deleaze be imminent.*"<sup>(1)</sup>

Unfortunately, however, things seemed to turn for the worst at once. At around 01:30 of the 24<sup>th</sup> most advanced companies they were overwhelmed and the opponent was proceeding towards the resistance line. Soon the situation appeared even in critical terms for the II/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf., Took the 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand brigade and 37 tanks of the *Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry* head on. Consequently, Gloria ordered Gen. Masina, commander of *Trento*, to bring to the threatened sector the II/61<sup>st</sup> Inf., Held in the second echelon, so you can if necessary launch a counterattack at local dawn. Except that at 02:30 the III/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf., who bore the brunt of the 153<sup>rd</sup> Scottish brigade, announced the destruction of two cornerstones of smaller company, not some inconvenience but certainly not offset by heavy losses inflicted on the *Highlanders*. And, worse yet, he signaled the presence of enemy elements infiltrated among the mesh of the German III/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf..

At first light also the cornerstones of the II/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. They were seriously affected by the New Zealanders. Until now the Command of the ACIT had not practically intervened.

They might find it hard to orientate and, in any case, intended to play the few cards available on the cheap as well as proper.

If Leese could declare moderately satisfied with his first night, Lumsden was not in the same state of mind. The opening of two major passes for the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. (Gen. Briggs) and the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. (Gen. Gatehouse) belonged to these divisions. Each had the task of carrying at least three passages in a parallel lane established at the turn of the limit of the field between the Australians and Scottish for the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. (2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. and 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd.), and by the sector of the New Zealand for the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. (8<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. and 133<sup>rd</sup> Mot. Bd.). The first lane opened into the Kidney, the second approximately midway to the crest of Miteinya.

The hours for the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps had been set as follows: the fall of darkness, leaving the collection area; 23:30 vanguards had to come to the south of the station of El Alamein; between that time and that 1 am the divisions have been very successful and it would be in columns, each on three tracks; for 1 hour, unless a countermand from Montgomery, was established at the start. The Command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had to bring his armored Oxalic over well before dawn, placing on the *Pierson* line the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Brigade (161 tanks) to the north, the 8<sup>th</sup> Armored (140 tanks) in the center and the 24<sup>th</sup> (133 tanks) to the south. Subsequently, after dawn, the two wing brigades would advanced of a few kilometers, covering the exposed side with their motorized infantry; then, in the morning or even later, the corps would have resulted in *Skinflint*, on the Rahman track, ready to destroy the part of northern armored reserves of the ACIT. But wisely:

"For no reason -He had prescribed Lumsden - rushing eyes closed against the enemy antitank artillery they groped to pass through the narrow passage crowded with tanks. In these cases you will need to prepare a coordinated plan that includes the destruction of anti-tank guns by the artillery and machine guns."<sup>(2)</sup>

Optimism of the planning, after 1 o'clock in the morning the armored divisions had precedence over all the tracks, but it was obvious that, if necessary, they would have helped the infantry to break the position of strength.

The reclamation of the lanes was entrusted to two special groups of forces. The *Minefield Task Force* of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. was formed from the second battalion of *Rifle Brigade*, a tank platoon of each regiment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., two squadrons and a field park company of the engineers, a transmissions element

and a unit of the military police. That the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. consisted of a squadron and two companies field engineers, a field park company, elements of transmission and a unit of the military police.

While 500 armored and wheeled vehicles of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp waited south of the station of El Alamein, the two special groups had gone ahead with the infantry. The 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. *Task Force* began its work about midnight. It made his way slowly with many difficulties, including the malfunction of several *mine-detectors*, and around 04:00 had to stop more or less half way because of the bitter resistance of a cornerstone of the III/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and one of the II/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. .. Briggs, however, had advanced the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. and the wheels of the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd.: progression at a crawl, in a dense mass of clouds of smoke and sand, in the midst of discussions and doubts about the situation and the tension caused by a tank or truck place out of action by the mines here and there explosions. At dawn the division was diluted along the three passes components lane north, with the head still far from *Oxalic*.

Although the *Task Force* of the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. proceeded to operate in New Zealand sector around midnight. It met similar stumble to those found further north, but at dawn the four passes of the southern lane were opened up to the crest of Miteiriya. Gatehouse put in a column his division: first the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., followed the division command, then the 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. and finally the 133<sup>rd</sup> Mot. Bd. But the end result was disappointing. The regiments of the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. advancing without coordination due to the different time of reclamation of the openings and when over looked on the crest of Miteiriya found not only another minefields and landmines, but also large anti-tank fire by the II/382nd Inf. and the III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf., who knocked out eight *Crusader* and as many *Grant*. To give an idea of the conditions of the division at first light of the 24<sup>th</sup> suffice it to say that the 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. was scattered in the no man's land, the area flooded by the artillery and vehicles from Australia, Scotland and New Zealand, and the 133<sup>rd</sup> Mot. Bd. was riding the Red track, about five kilometers south west of the resort of El Alamein. To quote a comment by the British: "*The congestion was appalling and a great confusion reigned everywhere. ..., I had the impression of being in a parking lot of cars badly organized at a meeting of races in a small and dusty race track.*"<sup>(3)</sup>

In the area of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp., the breakthrough was entrusted to the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. (Gen Harding), with the aid of the 44<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. (Gen Hughes) since it was devoid of infantry. The plan provided for three stages. At First

the division, backed by artillery of the 44<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., had to overcome the minefields *January* and *February*, passing between Deir el Munassib and Qaret el Himeimat, while the 1<sup>st</sup> French Inf. Bd. (Gen. Koenig) was responsible for facilitating the operation by infiltrating from the south, in the area immediately to the west of Qaret el Himeimat (sketch n. 86). The second phase would see the elimination of all resistance of the Italian X Corp, until Gebel Kalakh. The last part of the plan depended on the developments of the fight: if all went well, the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp would deepen penetration.

Given the available troops, the British effort was applied to the center of the sector of the *Folgore*, a few kilometers north of el Qaret Himeimat, on a narrow front attack. A *Task Force* was to open four passages in *January*, so it would pass the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. with the brigades in the column. The flanks were protected to the north by the VII Battalion of the *Queen's Royal Regiment* and south by two thick smoke screens made by RAF and the artillery.

At 21:00 the *Queen's* left the base, except that the direction of attack did not affect a forward structure resting in *January*, but on a stretch of mines scattered to cover a gap-controlled south by a salient described by the security line ( sketch n. 87). So the British were to fall under the fire of the 22nd sappers co. and the 6<sup>th</sup> Paratroopers co. deployed in the northeast corner of that salient. Moreover, in contrast to what had happened in the XXI Corp, the artillery of the Thunderbolt immediately opened the barrage. The *Queen's* essentially soon found themselves badly off, so much to lose about 180 men, including the commander, and barely able to stay just west of *January*, without even reaching the track of Whisky. Only around 03:00 they settled down in to a defense.

Meanwhile, the *Task Force* of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. had also opened the way for fighting. It was composed of 44<sup>th</sup> reconnaissance regiment mounted on tracked crawlers, two companies of the first battalion of the *Rifle Brigade*, two squadrons of engineers, a platoon of *Stuart*, a anti-tank battery, six *Scorpions*. The nearly three kilometers of line security invested were manned by 400 men of the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> paratroopers companies reinforced by members of the Ruspoli KG. Here, too, the beginning was marked by confusion, having many lanterns bounding off the path, and rather late. The first shock was therefore repulsed with relative ease by the defenders.

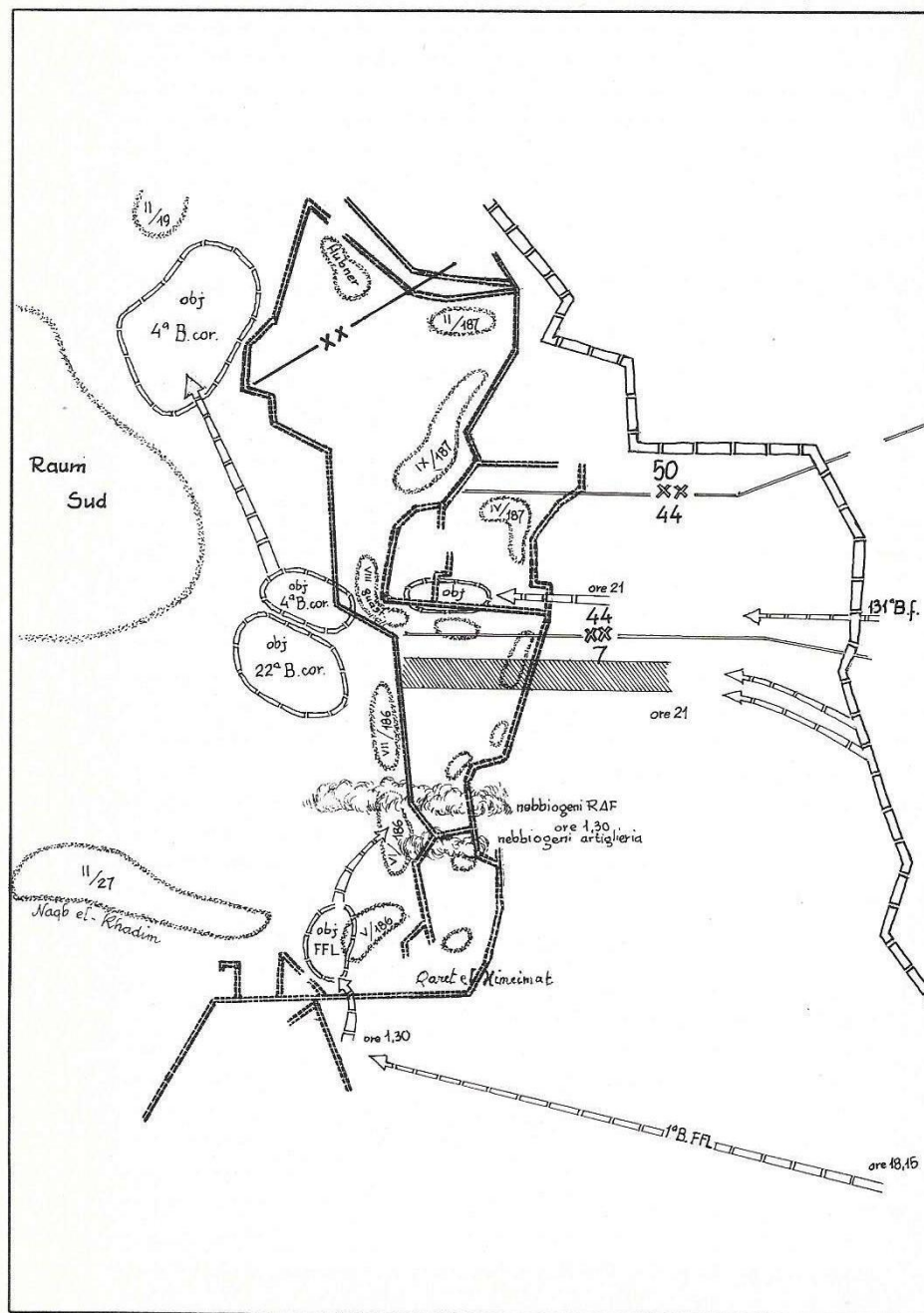
In addition, the Scorpion (5) were put out of action one after another by mechanical failures or losses in personnel, which forced him to make a



r The attack plan of 13<sup>th</sup> British Corps

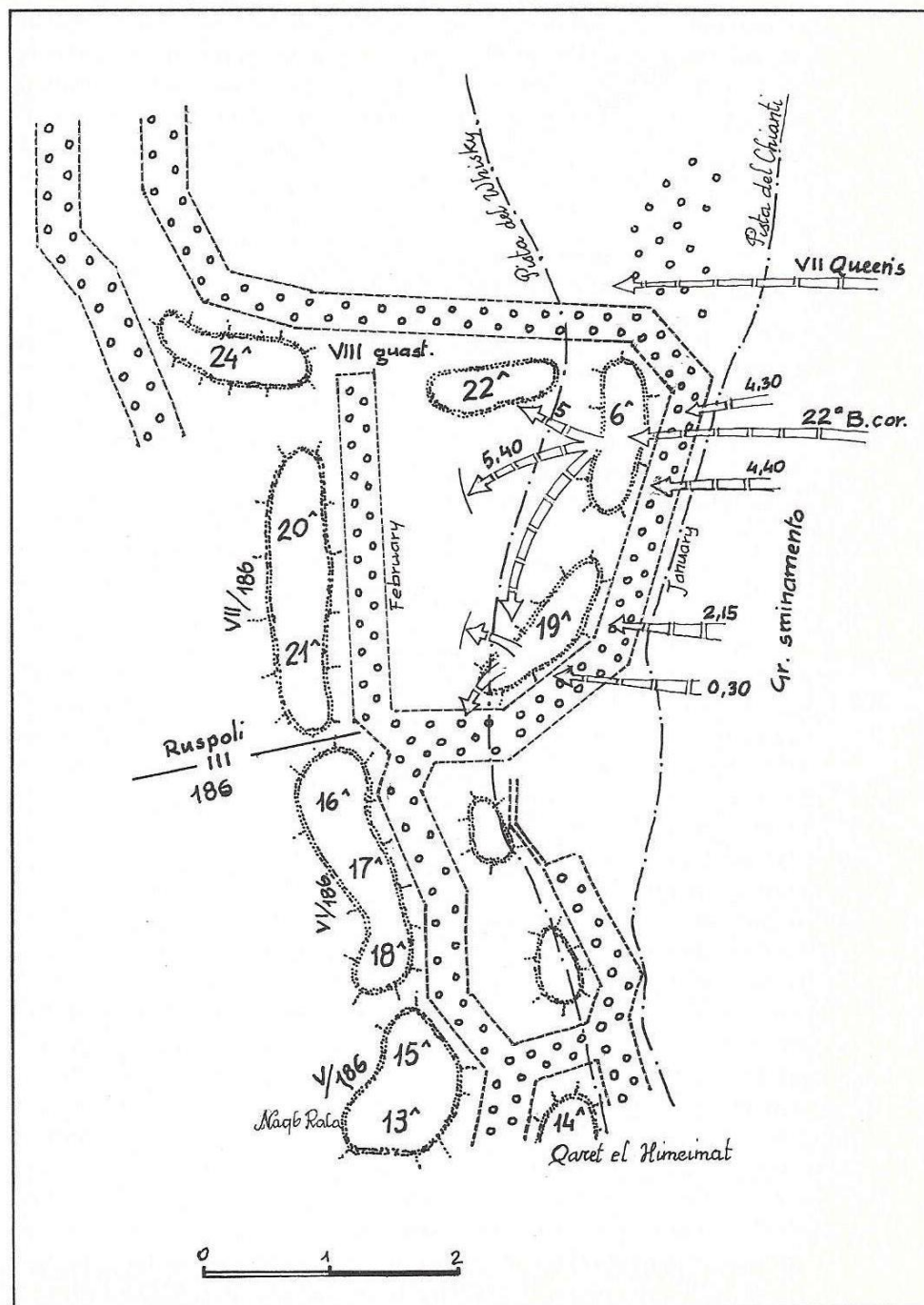
IL PIANO DI ATTACCO DEL 13° CORPO BRITANNICO

Schizzo n. 86



L'ATTACCO DELLA 7<sup>a</sup> D.COR. BRITANNICA  
LA NOTTE DEL 24 OTTOBRE

Schizzo n. 87





by hand much of the mine search and clearance. Overcoming setbacks, between 2 and 4 am the passages were made usable for tank units, which had approached covering ten kilometers of trail in no man's land. After a desperate fight the British riflemen had already made two small bridgeheads in the heart of the two cornerstones of the *Folгоре*, but while the 6<sup>th</sup> cp. was now half destroyed, the 19<sup>th</sup> was still holding. Gen. Harding did not want to wait for the completion of the minesweepers group's work and inciting the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. This immediately put into the breach to the north the 5<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, which spread to the flanks of the remaining defenses, including the centers of focus the 22<sup>nd</sup> sappers co.. At sunrise, the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. was with the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. astride of *January*, and the 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. slightly to the east of that minefield. The salient had been annulled, but the British losses were minor and, worse still, the *Task Force* resulted decimated and the attempt made towards 05:30 proceeding on *February* miscarried under stopping fire of the VI Parachute Battalion, making clear the difficulty if not the impossibility of implementing such a feat by day.

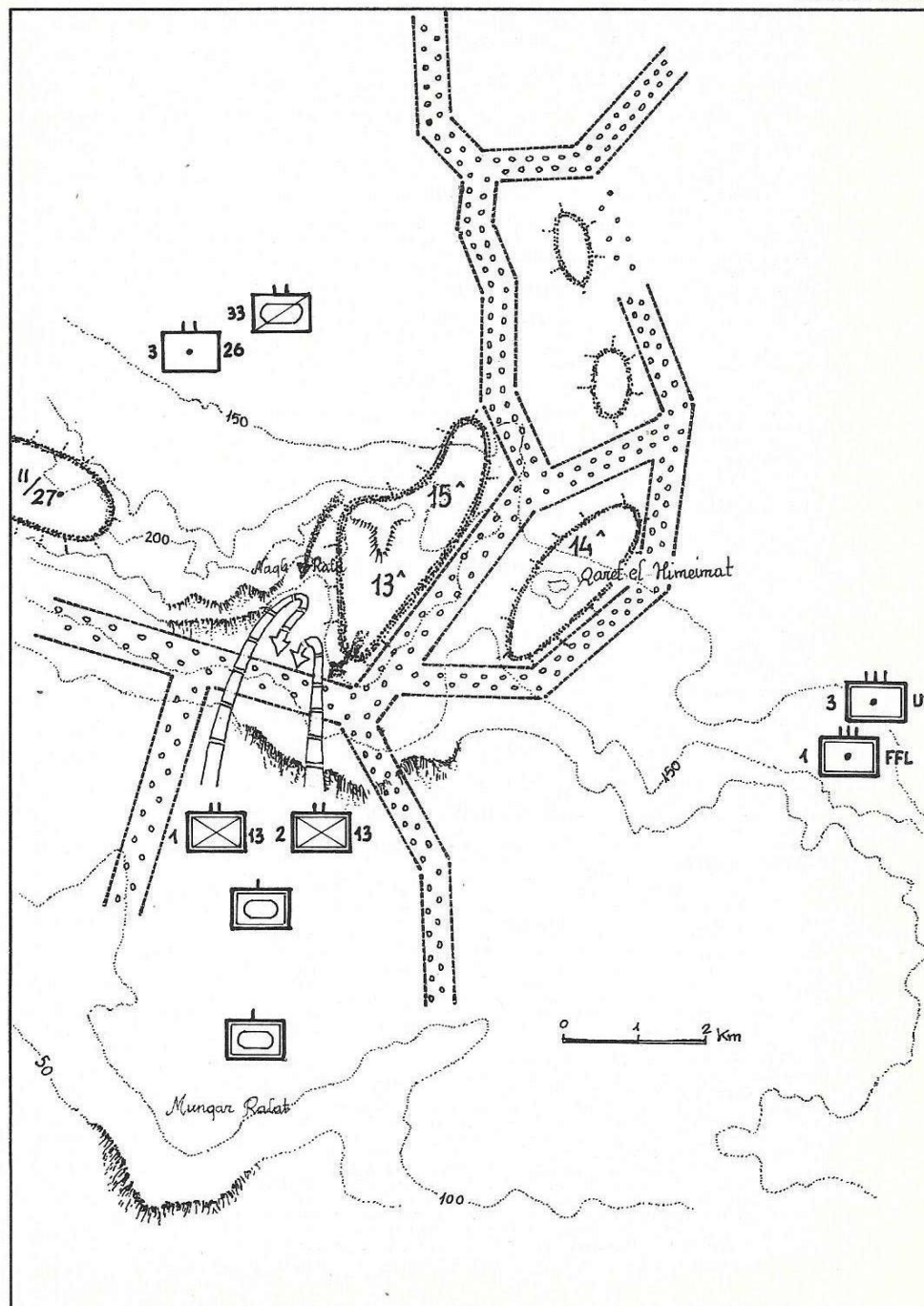
Far south we were for the 1<sup>st</sup> French Brigade. Gen. Koenig was not at all enthusiastic about the task assigned. First he had to overcome some fifteen kilometers of no man's land in vehicle and apparently there was not much to escape the enemy. Then it was necessary to well assess the extent of the defense. At first the positions of the Qaret el Himeimat area were considered in the hands of a whole regiment, which would place a heavy problem of power relations. The least that could be considered essential was a strong artillery and a consistent support of tanks, both elements insufficiently present in the brigade. With the passing of the weeks the British intelligence service made it clear that in the area resulted deployed one battalion, and not too robust. On the eve of the offensive all that was known: the *Folгоре* had responsibility for the entire southern sector of the front with about 3,500 men; his battalions had an average strength of 400 men; by Naqb Rala to Qaret el Himeimat was the V/186<sup>th</sup> Inf. with some Germans 88 guns (sketch n. 88).

Based on the information acquired, the Koenig brigade was therefore deemed sufficient to the task, of course, with some additions. Initiated the organization of the tactical action, Horrocks on the October 18, Alexander the 19<sup>th</sup> and Harding the 20<sup>th</sup> wanted to feel the pulse of the unit, while remaining visibly baffled the obvious discontent of Koenig, who stressed the inherent strength of the positions and the excellent accommodation

r The attack of **the** 1<sup>st</sup> French Bd. on night of 24 October

L'ATTACCO DELLA 1<sup>a</sup> BRIGATA FRANCESE  
LA NOTTE SUL 24 OTTOBRE

Schizzo n. 88



the *Folgore*. In fact, to be precise, in front of these hesitations, Horrocks rejected any delay and warned that if the French had considered the mission beyond their capacity, the commitment would be entrusted to a British brigade, which would have fulfilled with equal forces to those provided. Obviously then Koenig was silent.

The operation was to remove the pillar of the southern line of the Italian X Corps and end with the occupation of the plain of El Taqa by the evening of the 24. Koenig flinch in three phases: the conquest of Naqb Rala on the night of the 24<sup>th</sup>; elimination of defenses Qaret el Himeimat and making contact with the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. on the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup>; continuation of the effort until Naqb el Khadim and consolidation in place. The troops were therefore divided into four groups. The group A, ie half the 32<sup>nd</sup> Brigade reinforced (Leut. Col. Amilakvari) had to launch the attack from the south towards the goal of Naqb Rala; group B, consisting of a battlegroup at battalion level, remained in distant area, initial location Qor er Laban, ready to move on Naqb Rala and to continue on Naqb el Khadim; group C, made up of the 1<sup>st</sup> French artillery, the 3<sup>rd</sup> British artillery and anti-aircraft and anti-tank batteries, gave support fire from a deployment to the south-west of Qaret el Himeimat. Security was provided by group K, which with three armored detachments would avoid interference in the action of the group A and, in particular, the intervention of the German Kiehl KG, believed in the area north-west of Naqb Rala.

At 19:15 the group A began to approach, reaching the minefield between Qaret el Himeimat and the Qattara Depression on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. The passage of the obstacle seems to have marked the beginning of the French misadventures: radio links collapsed and from that when everything seemed to proceed more or less isolated acts. As for the direction of attack and the real balance of power they would allow all hope, failing harmonization of efforts and cooperation infantry-artillery results could only be disappointing. The violent resistance of the paratroopers did the rest.

In defense was the V/186<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Folgore*: a battalion very skimpy, although well reinforced with accompanying weapons, on a line of more than six kilometers. The commander, Leut. Col. Izzo, had a total of 400 men, 17 pieces of 46/32, nine machine guns and three 81 mortars <sup>(4)</sup>. High morale and psychological preparation for the impending battle. There was no tactical connection with the II/27<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Pavia*, deployed on a broad front to the west of Naqb Rala. As the contribution of fire were available in the area a group

of 75 (the normal sector, however, was in the north-east), a battery 75 and the company of 81 mm. divisional mortars. There was also a German battery of 88, but at the very beginning of the attack the French, without warning and without any worry of experience, moved to the north.

The V paratroopers had a company in Qaret el Himeimat and two further back, resting on *February*. For all the main front was to the east. Due to the support offered by the terrain, Izzo felt quite calm against the attempts coming from the east and southeast. Different was the discourse of Naqb Rala. Here the ground fell quite gently to the Qattara Depression, by producing an invitation naturally very attractive, because adduced behind the device and allowed the raid on the rear of the VI/186<sup>th</sup> Inf. or the artillery.

Consequently, Izzo predispose control of the plain of Naqb Rala, dominated from the pieces of a battery of 47/32, through the intervention of the order of a pull back of a hundred men, put together by subtracting a platoon from the various companies and adding artillerymen and miners who spontaneously volunteered.

The battalion of the Foreign Legion reached the base south of Naqb Rala after 1 am; after reorganizing, around 2 was set in motion. Shortly after, from Qaret el Himeimat it was reported the sound of traffic coming from the south, confirming the worse hypothesis of an attack behind the V paratroopers. For a set of concurrent causes was not possible to get the barrage: the group of 75 had arrived the night before and could not make placement shots, the 75 battery is not timely received orders for trouble in radio link and the company mortars had range difficulty. But since even the French, who also had the comfort of 44 howitzers of 25 pounds and eight 5.5-inch guns, they could not enjoy the support hoped for, arresting fire of the paratroopers was enough to stop the legionnaires.

At about 03:00 advanced elements French, overcome the unexpected minefield laid to protect the area Naqb Rala, they came into contact with a part of the reinforcements, arranged so as to operate a dynamic contrast. So begot a fight that lasted for over an hour and a half. The difficulty of orientation and extremely ruthless tactics implemented by paratroopers, who were acting in small groups in violent counter assaults from multiple directions with a stream of grenades, alternating with fire from standstill by either bending the ground, put in crisis before forcing the assailant to stop undecided and then to recede slowly. Shortly after

05:00 Lt. Col. Amilakvari resolved to order the battalion to gather further back, to the II battalion to enter itself in contention and the tank company to keep fit to intervene.

The second attempt met with failure. A disconnect between companies advanced and basic fire of the battalion and the lively opposition of the rest of tucking the V paratroopers made vain initial penetration into a space that could be a harbinger of developments. As soon as the light of dawn enabled visibility into action the group of 75 and the divisional mortar company disrupting the French formation. Shortly before 07:00 the southern edge of the plain of Naqb Rala was cleared. At this point, and only at this point, unexpected six German armored cars came from the north of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn: initially rallied in front of the 47 battery, then, at 07:30, advanced southwards taking under fire from the enemy falling back.<sup>(5)</sup>

The losses suffered by some 130 paratroopers engaged in combat amounted to 24 dead (including an officer), 38 wounded (including the Leut. Col. Izzo and two other officers) and about twenty missing.

## 24 OCTOBER

At 7 am on the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry of the British 30<sup>th</sup> Corp they were virtually, but not completely, attested at *Oxalic* (sketch n. 89). Invested the front of the Axis defenses had suffered a severe blow: the safety zone was largely gone, the position of resistance had toppled over attained just holding back the attack. More precisely, it Leese could understand, some battalions of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and the 382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. had been overwhelmed by the formidable artillery of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and then overwhelmed or heavily invested, especially in the Australian sector. Still looked fierce resistance of the III/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. in front of the *Scottish* and III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. before the New Zealanders. The South African progress in the field were limited, but then the plan did not require much.

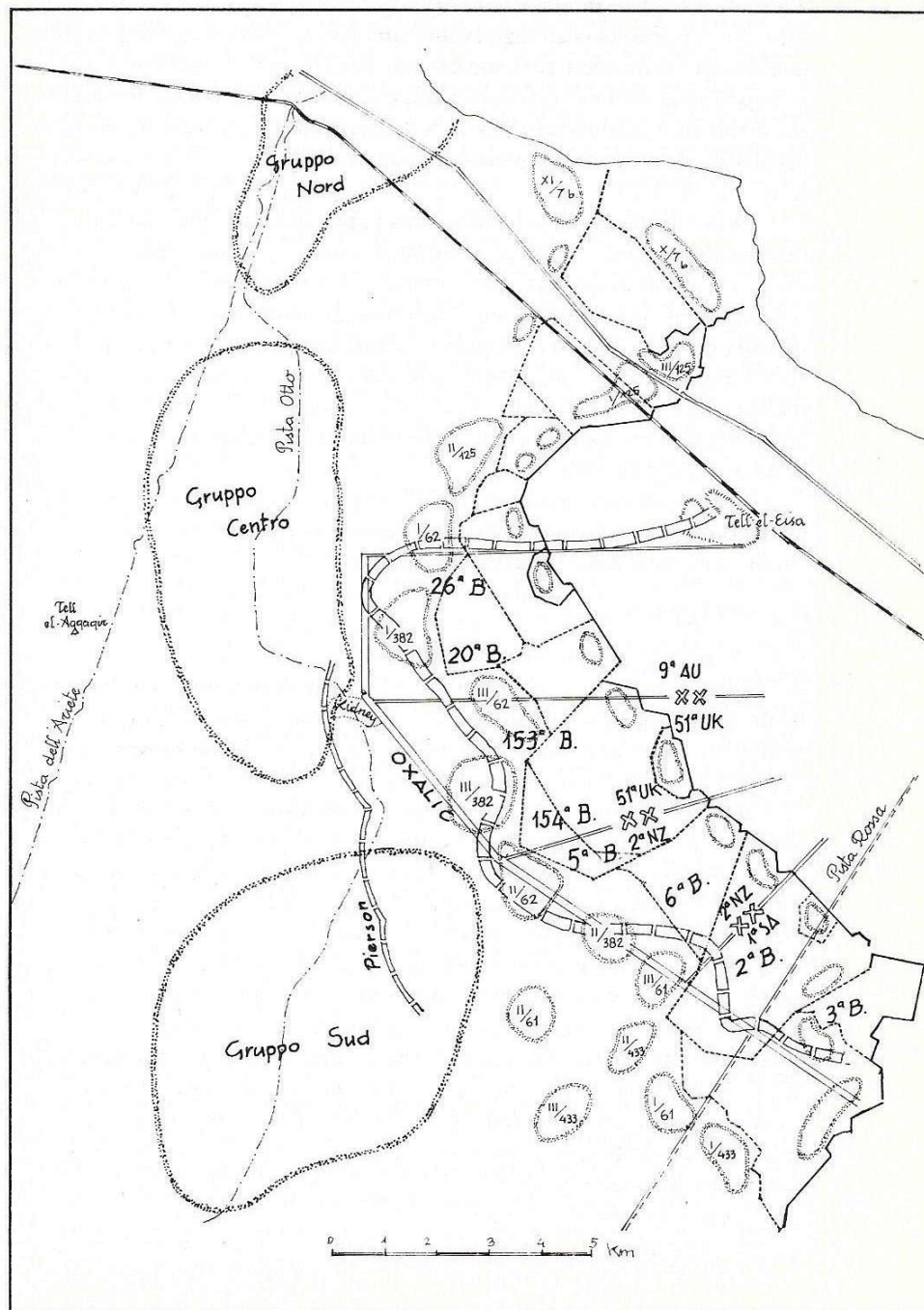
This situation made the communications that came from the divisions and the commands from the prisoners; a situation not very coincident with the aims of the day before, not only to the incomplete achievement of *Oxalic* and failure to release the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp beyond the point of resistance, but mainly because the two main lanes were still littered with mines.

The Command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army collected data on losses incurred

The line reached by the 30<sup>th</sup> British Corps at dawn on 24 October r

LA SITUAZIONE NEL SETTORE SETTENTRIONALE  
ALL'ALBA DEL 24 OTTOBRE

Schizzo n. 89



overnight: they were not excessive. According to a first estimate, the total of the 51st *Highlanders* hovering around a thousand men, Australians and South Africans nounced 350 men per division, while the New Zealanders assessing theirs at 800<sup>(6)</sup>. In essence, fewer than 3,000 men for the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp and a number irrelevant to the 10<sup>th</sup>. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corp signaled just over 500 dead, wounded and missing.

The first decision to Montgomery, as concerned the northern sector, which was the next night the Australians dedicate themselves to the crumbling of the position of strength, the Scots completely achieving *Oxalic*, New Zealanders are pushed from the crest south of Miteiriya. At the same time the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp was to completely clean up the two lanes. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, where it encountered the inability of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. to break through the *Folgore*, it was to achieve this by employing a brigade of the 44<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. in a night attack.

In the forward positions of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corps, the infantry was trying to dig under the best reaction to Italian-German fire; on the eastern slope of Miteiriya two armored brigades, the 9<sup>th</sup> in reinforcement to New Zealand and the 8<sup>th</sup> of the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., were crammed into an incredible congestion. Since the dawn Freyberg had formed a favorable idea of the tactical situation, judging you can still raid the tanks over the Axis lines. Therefore he ordered (7 am) to the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm Bd. to gather and prepare the way for the outpouring of the division of Gatehouse and warned the High Command who came seemed "*the appropriate time for the 10th Arm. Div. to produce the maximum effort for the crossing.*" From the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp the subject was endorsed on the 10<sup>th</sup> and from this the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., who replied that his tanks were blocked by crowding in the existing single roadway utilized by the New Zealand. While the response was the opposite way around 08:00 Freyberg turned back to Leese so solicited Lumsden and when he met the response of Gatehouse not lived with it. In his view it was merely a question of will: the right of the field there was a passage already usable. And then the congestion did not depend on New Zealand, but from lack of command of the British columns! So at 10:30 he did say the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp had ordered Currie in *January* to advance with few tanks remained at his 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. over the crest of Miteiriya and that, therefore, necessary that Gatehouse sustain him.

Apart from the fact that Currie could see over the ridge about forty enemy tanks and before moving wanted to know what support

artillery would gain and who would follow the armored unit, the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp, again interested, he pleaded not sorry to identify an opportunity and goal for such intervention. All this exchange of telephone calls were, understandably, put Leese in agitation, who appeared at 10:45 at the Command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div. Here he was made aware of the struggle that the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade was supporting to stop a opponent counterattack and the prospect of a second counter-attack against the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade. But he also realized that for the defensive position Miteiriya guaranteed on the whole complete reliability.

While Leese and Freyberg made a reconnaissance along the line, a message arrived from the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., with whom Gatehouse, in essence, appeared contrary to advance without the safety on the right side; However, because he was told to offer the New Zealand any help, he sought to have along the crest of his units in terms of attempts to trim down enemies, waiting to resume the attack that night or later, of course after having removed the German to anti-tank barrier by the artillery. Evidently there was to discuss and eventually Lumsden and Gatehouse found it expedient to go to the New Zealand Command. The meeting between the four commanders led to this conclusion: if Montgomery (already briefed by telephone by Leese) insisted to push the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp up to *Pierson*, might as well do it as soon as possible: that night Gatehouse-in conjunction with Briggs – would have attacked with the support of all the artillery of the 10<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Corp available, or about 300 pieces. The 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. and the cavalry regiment New Zealand would also moved behind a curtain moving in careful harmonization efforts, to hit the southern flank. To avoid any misunderstandings Montgomery made himself heard personally:

"In relation to my orders - he wrote later -I expect that the armored divisions would force the way open to flow though the opening. But there was a little reluctant about it. During the morning he derived the impression that they tended to a passive attitude (...). The commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp showed the energy and determination when things start to go wrong, and there was a general lack of offensive willingness in the armored divisions of the Corp (...).<sup>(7)</sup>

Consequently, given the need to shake up, Montgomery called Lumsden and told him to "a rouse" his division, because if someone had pulled back he would not hesitate to replace him with a general more worthy. Lumsden clarified ideas to



Briggs and Gatehouse, adding that the tanks had to fight their way without any concern for losses.

Slowly from the ACIT Command had put together the pieces of a mosaic of non simple construction, and in this it became clear the negative weight of the lack of precise sectoral responsibilities. Overnight ascertained that the penetration of British infantry and tanks concerned pockets J and L, that the safety zone was almost down the stretch invested and hit the point of resistance at the broken pocket L and the two sides; They were overwhelmed the III/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. by the Scots and II/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. from the New Zealand and the leaks they were swabbed at best with the participation of units of the German 115<sup>th</sup> Inf. and XII/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank of the *Littorio*; tenaciously resisted parts of the II and III/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf., but there was concern for a little more. At 06:15 Stumme tried to master events:

"The C. T. A. and the XX Corps - immediately – to restore the situation immediately with strong share of the 15<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and the *Littorio* armored division. First task: drive the enemy beyond the point of resistance". <sup>(8)</sup>

As can be seen, for such action had to agree two Corrp commands and two divisions. Shortly after the news came that the I/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf., at the extreme end of the Australian sector, had been overwhelmed, that not a company is still defending the edge of the pocket J. In exchange, the III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. could avert a threat of circumvention.

At 07.45, there was the first counterattack, led by II/8<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment* and IV/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank and DLVI Semoventi group, and seeks to restore the situation on the pocket J. Then, by the action of a second battle group (I/8<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and XII/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank), late in the morning it seemed that the picture was somehow improved. Gen. Langershausen proposed to reform the infantry with a new line of pillars being granted to the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. the new sector, but Stumme would be limited to the recovery of the pure and simple fallen structures. So the two mixed German companies would take over for the I/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf., an armored battalion to the I/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf., the III/115<sup>th</sup> Inf. to the III/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf., and II/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. to the II/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf..

At noon the ACIT ordered him to collect the remains of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. in a unit formation and to hold the line at all costs because the last infantry battalions available were already used.

In the afternoon, at 14:00, the 51<sup>st</sup> Highlanders Inf. Div. resumed effort to reach *Oxalic* and free the northern lane for the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div.. After a brief and bloody attack from the II *Seaforth* against

cornerstone of the III/ 382<sup>nd</sup> Inf., the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. He threw itself forward "at any cost", as specified by Briggs, and finally managed to break through reaching a short distance from the deployment of the II/46<sup>th</sup> artillery of the *Trento*, who began firing at close range. The intervention of a mixed group armored, made from the Italian side by XII/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank and DLVI Semoventi group, rejected and blocked the penetration after a struggle that lasted until dusk. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. now possessing 120 tanks (half Crusader and half Sherman) against 161 the previous night. The British estimated that he had knocked out about thirty Axis tanks of at least eighty who attacked them.

While the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. faced with difficulty in front of the *Kidney*, the 10<sup>th</sup> was preparing to start its advance. The order in which it was Lumsden to flow over minefields and, by contacting the 1<sup>st</sup> armored, is held ready to reject episodes of the *Panzer*. At dusk the two armored brigades, the 8<sup>th</sup> of Gen. Custance and the 24<sup>th</sup> of Gen. Kenchington, with 250 tanks, covered the ridge of Miteiriya. Behind the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., to the left, he was the 9<sup>th</sup>, reinforcing the New Zealand and shall hold itself to the left of the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. was near the *Pierson* line from the ridge about four kilometers. The dangers were essentially two: the clearance of the mined fields, especially for the 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., Whose direction of attack, changed to bring it closer to the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., Now cut in diagonal tracks already opened and marked; passing by the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. a depression in the south-west of El Wishka. The coordination of progression thus assumed much importance.

But the operation was not going to enjoy peace before it began. He had just lowered the sun of Freyberg, who as "master of the house" evidently felt very involved, phoned Leese and without much circumlocution told him that in his opinion the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. was too controlled from behind and who harbored serious misgivings about the quality of the organization of the impending attack. The concerns of Freyberg derived, it seems, that were surfacing numerous detachments in orders branched to the action of the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., who instead would have to be closely aligned to the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. Leese turned to Lumsden, albeit with due tact, but the interview was not encouraging because shortly after he felt obliged to inform de Guingand have reported lackluster impression that the commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp and was very skeptical about the results of operation.

The 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. is found from the start involved in a number of

inconveniences caused or suffered by the mine sweeping unit, which generated confusion, disorder and delays, to the point that the first passage was obtained at 3am. After that it was impossible to trace the radio tank to communicate immediately to the command of the brigade.<sup>(9)</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. had a worse fate. He had just started to cross the ridge along the two passages opened by mine sweeping groups that the desert is illuminated by a fire storm that strikes a over long columns proceeding slowly. While a pair of raids of the few Axis planes set on fire twenty-five trucks loaded with ammunition and fuel and other vehicles. The disorder caused by the bombing, the traffic jam resulted from the trucks on fire, and the intense artillery fire of the XXI Corp -DAK were added so effectively that at midnight Custance resolved to ask Gatehouse suspension of the attack. The commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. found it hard to realize the events for the malfunctioning of the radio and was already annoyed at the delay of the 24<sup>th</sup> Brigade. He replied in the negative, hoping things would improve, but when he was called on the phone by Lumsden made the proposal to Custance to withdraw the brigades on the back of the Miteiriya ridge to avoid being in daylight in full view of the enemy.

At 01:30 Lumsden put de Guingand aware of the status quo and was manifested also in agreement with his subordinates. The Chief of the G.S. of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was very disturbed to learn that the situation had become critical to the point and wanted to hear Leese, whose command was located a short distance from the advanced army. There was no doubt: Montgomery had to intervene. For at 02:30 the commanders of the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 30<sup>th</sup> Corps were summoned to a decisive meeting.

By the Italian XXI Corp the events of the evening of 24 October were followed carefully, so to speak, helpless. All that existed was in line. One line, we add, that had their hands the ACIT and DAK, given the infill made with parts of the armored reserve. Having handed out all of XXI Corps was often overruled by the ACIT. Placing comparatively weak units, the XX Corps was often overruled by the DAK, as well as the *Littorio* was the 15th *Panzer*. But, given the circumstances, no difficulties arose it by Gloria, nor by De Stefanis, nor from Bitossi. It seemed too important at stake to take care of matters of form. But it should be noted as of now the passage of the direction of the battle, at various levels, to the Germans to make themselves

account of exactly what will be done at the retreat and to understand the state of mind of the Italian infantry.

Therefore, the containment -because of this, one might talk - made to the same position of strength for the time being held and could put in serious embarrassment the British 10<sup>th</sup> Corp with the static strength of disparate units organize a stronghold and artillery fire, really valuable.

Let us now turn to the sector of the X Corp, starting from the far south. We left the first French brigade to disappointment for the vain attempt against Naqb Rala. If the attack had been struck down by the V battalion paratroopers, the withdrawal was made painful the intense fire of all weapons and artillery defense. Worse still, at about 08:30, while the second battalion of the Foreign Legion was rearranging the best at the foot of the slope, a formation of the German 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn., from the west along the plateau, I broke the battalion putting it in crisis. Soon there arose the general retreat, each unit as it could, on its own behalf. At about 10:00, passed back the minefield south of el Qaret Himeimat, Leut. Col. Amilakvari was fatally shot in the head by shrapnel. The French losses have been indicated in very different ways: from a minimum of a hundred according to the *Journal de marche* of the 13<sup>th</sup> demi-brigade, to a maximum of 190 according to the command of the British 13<sup>th</sup> Corp without details <sup>(10)</sup>.

At the center of the sector of the *Folgore*, the last centers of fire in the area of security fell one after the other during the day. The survivors, most of them wounded, managed to repair the lines of the Ruspoli grouping. The British tanks, meanwhile, retreated over *January* and the salient, well swept, remained only path by enemy patrols of various entities. The lull allowed the contenders to take the most appropriate measures to the respective purposes.

The *Folgore* could not do much indeed. He turned from the laying of mines and the XXXI sappers battalion deployed north of Ruspoli; received the II/28<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Pavia*, he inserted most of the sappers and paratroops. , The issue of the reactivation of the security zone and for this purpose a strong counterattack Frattini decided a robust counter for which He gathered in the sector of the I/28<sup>th</sup> Inf., a small group of the *Ariete* and a unit of German tank destroyers. Also in *January* Harding wanted to resume the push to get a beachhead west of *February*, using the 131<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bd., placed now in the employ of the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., Less the VII *Queen's* too badly damaged after the action

of the previous night. This deployment provided for the infantry in the head then the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd..

Both designs encountered various problems. The Italian counterattack was evidently born under bad omens. It is unclear what followed. The fact is that, without waiting for the arrival of the new battalion, or perhaps on the basis of other decisions taken at the time, the operation was given to two companies of the II/28<sup>th</sup> Inf., So that at 16:00, when the commander of I/28<sup>th</sup> Inf. went to the command of the sector, he was told that the action was already in progress. As for armored vehicles, to the rendezvous came only five *Panzerjaeger*, that sweep away the miners-artisans of the *Folgore*, including the company commander. In the understandable confusion and irritation that followed this *exploit*, the infantry companies they set for themselves in the area of security. A little for the mix up, a little for the resumption of an intense fire of the British batteries, he tried to call them back, but without success for lack of connection. Pushing far ahead, they stopped at dusk settling in the better they could and a little later were overwhelmed by the enemy. The enemy which had in turn organizational disadvantages, so that the start time of the action was moved twice, and was able to get moving only at 21:00.

At nightfall of the first day of battle had spread, at least among the commands, a strange news, arousing a sense of unease: Stumme was considered lost and as a result, von Thoma had taken the reins of the army (while remaining command of the DAK). The disappearance of Stumme was something mysterious. Shortly after dawn had decided to go to the advanced units with Col. Buchting, head of army transmissions, a captain and interpreter, to clearly see in the situation. He must fear it grave because he had expressed before leaving to Col. Westphal's opinion that it was appropriate to demand the return of Rommel. About three hours after the driver and the captain returned to the Command of the ACIT carrying the lifeless body of the Colonel. The two survivors told of stumbled across an enemy machine gun (obviously an element infiltrated in the fabric of defense), to which fire had escaped reversing the gear and sped away. Col. Buchting had been mortally wounded. No idea where the general ended up. It only remained to be supposed that, he was hit also, and was thrown from the car in race.<sup>(11)</sup>

The loss, for whatever reason, the commander in chief is basically an event that can happen in war; but to this was added

other absences. Do not forget that both the XXI and the X Corp lacked commanders and the DAK had a new commander and the Chief of Staff, Bayerlein, licensed. Of course, the news did not reach the units.

But the atmosphere, at least in the northern sector, was not to be the best. That evening Col. Ruggeri Laderchi, Chief of the G.S. of the XX Corp, wrote in the historical journal: *"The sudden and violent enemy action, as expected, has dismayed the rank and file, who must appeal to all his energies to rectify the seriously compromised situation."*

To close the day should also take a look at what was happening in Italy and Germany. In Rome, some reflections made by Cavallero to Mussolini by phone at 18:00 can serve as a comment:

- "What is not an offensive in a grand style and you can not think of preparatory actions, because it is slow (...)"

- "In all cases the well-informed circles say that this time the British have clearly taken the initiative and that consider that their attempt has essentially defensive purpose (...) would undoubtedly underestimate the importance of this initiative ( ... ) ",

- "The only thing that can give the impression that [the offensive] has really started is a message of the RAF:" (...) *We now presents a great opportunity to beat the enemy and end the war.*" I think that all this noise is made for political purposes, as the day before yesterday also claimed Marshal Kesselring "

- "We prefer to look at things as if they were great; best if they are not large (...). We are ready to act as if it were a major offensive. "

But later telegraphed Bastico: *"Everything points to provide that English attack opposite El Alamein constitutes beginning foretold and expected major offensive (...)."*

## 25 OCTOBER

At 02:30 (03:30 hours local, remember), and Montgomery received Leese Lumsden. He was in good spirits and, although hovered a certain mood 'service', listened quietly exposure of the situation, as well as known by its main suborders. Leese was limited to mentioning the progress of the crumbling position of strength;

Lumsden told of the delay of the 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. and the confusion in the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., as well as the request of Gatehouse to desist and withdraw behind the Miteiriya ridge also the tanks that had managed to drawing through the passages (the *Staffordshire Yeomanry* of the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd.). Montgomery, always very calm, laid out the inappropriateness of such a decision and, on the other hand, the need to continue as planned. Lumsden then begged him to want to talk in person, by phone, with Gatehouse. Montgomery had no difficulty, but:

"I discovered with horror that he [Gatehouse] was located about 16 kilometers behind his armored brigades. I spoke to him in a tone that most decided and ordered him to go ahead and take the reins of combat; He had to fight their way and drive his division from the head and not the tail" <sup>(12)</sup>.

Ultimately, initial orders were confirmed, but the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. It was allowed to leave to pursue only the *Staffordshire Yeomanry*, while the other two regiments would remain behind the crest. <sup>(13)</sup>

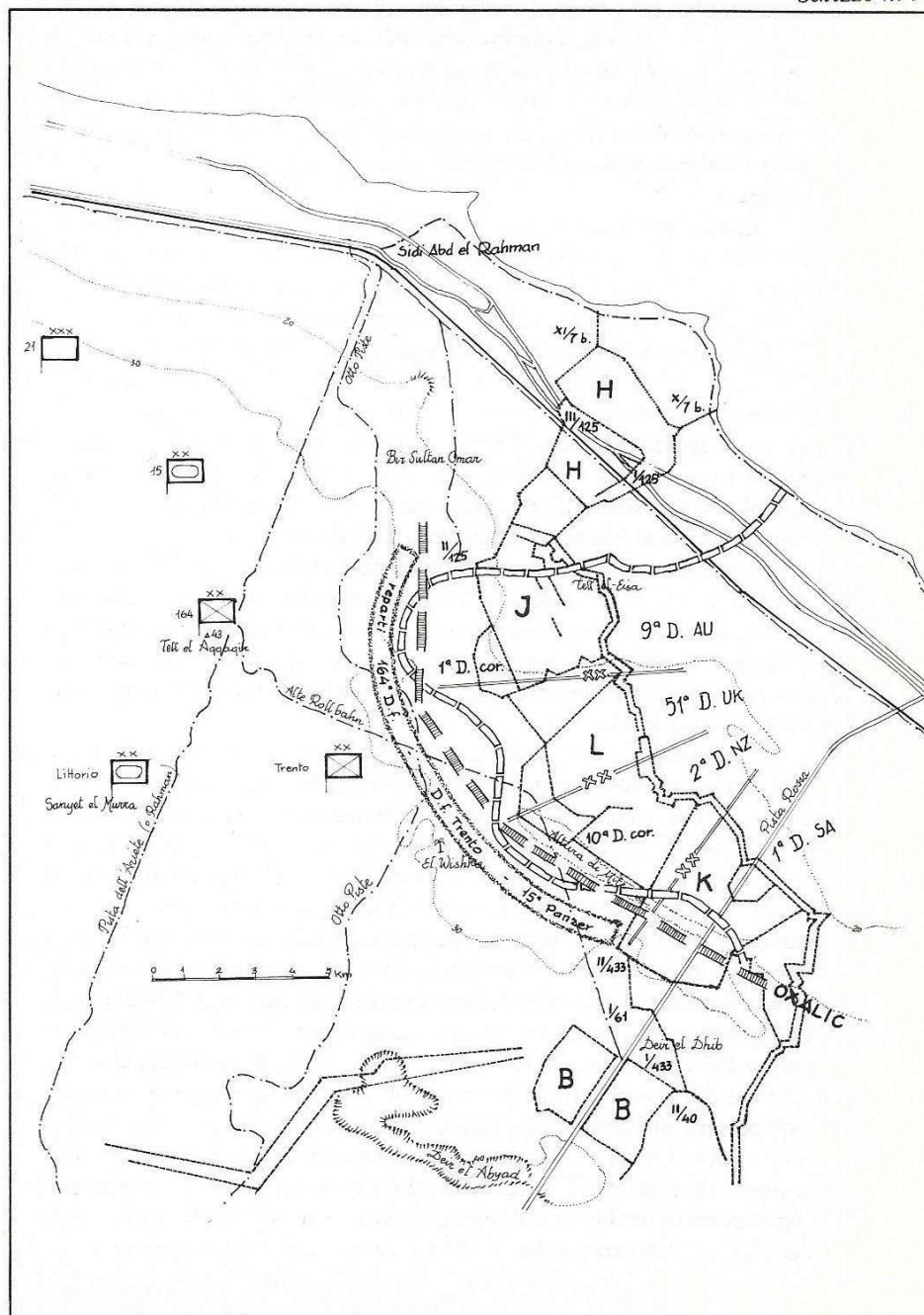
As you can imagine, Montgomery did not let him finish the meeting without something incisive. He is taken by Lumsden and appeared determined to finally get to see the armored divisions passed the mined band to be able to maneuver; in those conditions any hesitation or indecision would be fatal "*if he or the commander of the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Division were not in tune I found others who were.*" <sup>(14)</sup>

According to Montgomery pointing this out immediately it gave good results, but in reality the units of Gatehouse continued for some time to move forward on their own, on the basis of previous orders. The British pressure on the bow of the positions defended hard by the II and III/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and II and III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. It was very strong, even if not very coordinated, and inevitably led to success at the remains of the German 382<sup>nd</sup> Inf.. Of course the mixed groups of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and *Littorio*, and especially the anti-tank batteries, waiting for the pass the armored columns of Lumsden and daylight abruptly changed the hopes of British tanks (sketch n. 90). The 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., well supported by Australian and Scottish, had come to a kilometer from the area of the Kidney. A few kilometers further south began the uneven deployment of the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div.: the 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. had informed the target came with the 41<sup>st</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, leaving the 45<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* and XI KRRC battalion in reserve on the crest of Miteiriya; 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd.. had occupied the area of El Wishka with the *Staffordshire Yeomanry*, which, however, while the other two

r The situation in the northern sector on the evening of October 25

LINEA RAGGIUNTA DAL 10° E DAL 30° CORPO INGLESI  
ALL'ALBA DEL 25 OTTOBRE

Schizzo n. 90





regiments approached slowly (Lumsden's orders about it had not yet reached Custance), was suddenly struck by the deadly shooting of 88 and 75 pieces of the ACIT. In the chaos that followed, they turned back before the two regiments on the march, then *Staffordshire* had remaining fifteen *Grant* and *Sherman*. Shortly after the entire brigade was again collecting the shelter of the Miteiriya ridge.

Farther south was the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. almost isolated, had overcome a company of the III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf., But in the end was contained thanks to the energetic actions of repression and blockage by I and II/46<sup>th</sup> Artillery *Trento*. It was moved to the west and, although he had suffered some wear and tear, it was still quite compact. However, it halted in a slight depression between the Miteiriya ridge and Wishka, fell too it under the fire of the Italian and German anti-tank guns. Gen. Currie asked to retreat to refuel and then start again, but Freyberg, who had seen no enthusiasm to return the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., Does not permit them, fearing that Lumsden blockaded at Miteiriya also his 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd.

Not even from the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp came consoling news. During the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> had moved the 131<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bd., followed by the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. Both were resolute to make its way through *February*, in an environment of security created by a screen of anti-tank artillery on the left and from the 4<sup>th</sup> light Arm. Bd. on the right. A few kilometers further back was the 132<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd.

The impact of the V and VI *Queen's*, which proceeded in close contact with a moving curtain, against the thin line of the *Folgore* was violent. The death of Leut. Col. Ruspoli, commander of the namesake group, and losses suffered by this, they broached to Gen. Frattini to constitute in the sector of the 28<sup>th</sup> Inf. with the remains of the VIII sappers Battalion, the II/28<sup>th</sup> Inf. and VII/186<sup>th</sup> Inf. the stretch invested was held by the 20<sup>th</sup> paratroopers Co., who had just re-occupied the positions after the outstanding counter-attack, and by the 21<sup>st</sup>: 250 men in all, arranged on a double row of centers of fire, against no less than 1,500 British. The fight was wild. The two battalions attackers lost a total of 350 men, but managed to form a small bridgehead west of *February*, destroying some advanced elements; paratroopers lost a hundred men, but contained the thrust. Then he began to *Queen's* a painful waiting. Mine sweeper groups evidently mistaken direction, because the two passages they opened did not debouched within the beachhead but outside. Thus the tanks of the 4<sup>th</sup> *C.L. Yeomanry* and the 1<sup>st</sup> *Royal Tanks*, area from outside, they found

a welcome from parts of the *Folgore* and units of the *Ariete* and the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* readily realized. Quickly the passages were blocked from immobilized carcasses and soon 31 *Crusader* and *Grant* of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. were put out of action.

At the 04:00 Gen. Harding, who was following closely the action, decided to suspend all attempts until dawn, when the light of day would have allowed engineers to orient well and to open other passages. The sun rose, it became clear, however, impossible to conclude anything in plain view of the *Folgore* and Harding, with the approval of Horrocks, withdrew very privately the 4<sup>th</sup> *CL Yeomanry* east of *January*, he left the 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* in the former security zone, between *January* and *February*, to support the *Queen's* and told them to stay in place all day.

For his part Horrocks tried to speak with Montgomery, but he was in a meeting with Alexander, exposed the problem to de Guingand. The *Folgore* showed no signs of the least to give them positions, much less, to retire; therefore solutions were reduced to throw into the fray even the 132<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd., that the remains of the 44<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., or, alternatively, to give up that part of the front and sticking instead to Deir el Munassib with the 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. (Gen. J.S. Nichols), supported by the 4<sup>th</sup> light Arm. Bd.. He, Horrocks, was inclined to this second solution because, by the idea that it was made, although the 132<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd. He was received to breach the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., that the venture had lost almost a regiment, was in danger of experiencing a massacre.

A mid-morning Alexander had gone to find Montgomery for a joint assessment of the situation. Although things did not go as devised, there was cause for satisfaction. First, the report compiled by the information service on the battle to 19:00 of the 24<sup>th</sup> stated that "*it looks like we got a complete surprise.*" As for the developments of the battle, the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp had made a hole about ten kilometers wide right towards the heart of the communications of the ACIT. The intention was to extend it to the north and south, but fierce resistance the New Zealand met induced a lot of caution. It could then point to the north to unlock the coastal road.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Corp was able to take over the whole embarrassing strip mined and reports of distance between its divisions seemed acceptable to address a major counterattack. However, fortunately, Alexander remarked, Stumme was depleting his available armor in actions of limited size <sup>(15)</sup>. Taking advantage of that error,

the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. could enhance the effect of the next attack Australian holding to his left.

The sticking point was concerned, as always, the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, which had been unable to overcome the bitter resistance of the *Folgore* or in the sector of el Qaret Himeimat or in the middle. There remained, however, that the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and the *Ariete* had not moved and that, basically, equalized the game. It could then accept the proposal of Horrocks to organize action at Deir el Munassib, who seemed sufficiently important because the attention of the Italian X Corp is concentrated there.

Another move seemed to have yielded good results. A formation of eight English motor launches, sent to Ras el Daba to simulate a landing attempt and attacked at 23:00 of the 24<sup>th</sup> from a dozen CR.42 north of Ras el Kenays, had been rejected by the loss of a boat, though it had reached the goal of keeping at the coast the *Trieste* and 90<sup>th</sup> Light.

The firm orders given from Montgomery to Leese and Lumsden, after a meeting held at the command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div., were the following. The 9<sup>th</sup> Australian had to attack that night hill 29 (hill 28 on the maps of the ACIT), a position of some domain of observation on the surrounding ground a couple of kilometers north of the Australian right, held by the II/125<sup>th</sup> Inf.. At the same time the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., reinforced by the 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., would continue over the Kidney in the direction of Tell el Aqqaqir. The 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. would be withdrawn with the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. and 133<sup>rd</sup> Mot. Bd. the need for reorganization. To Freyberg was given the task of patrolling a particularly aggressive, intended to promptly identify warning signs of a withdrawal of the Italian XXI Corp.

After these decisions Montgomery paused to consider the situation of the tanks compiled from information service. Considering only the large armored units, the picture at noon on 25 was presented as follows:

| 8 Army                     | <u>Situation</u> |     | ACIT                           | <u>Situation</u> |     |
|----------------------------|------------------|-----|--------------------------------|------------------|-----|
|                            | 23               | 25  |                                | 23               | 25  |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Arm. Div.  | 169              | 149 | 15 <sup>th</sup> <i>Panzer</i> | 112              | 37  |
| 10 <sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. | 280              | 167 | <i>Littorio</i>                | 115              | 108 |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd.   | 122              | 92  |                                |                  |     |
| 23 <sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd.  | 194              | 135 |                                |                  |     |
| 7 <sup>th</sup> Arm. Div.  | 214              | 191 | 21 <sup>st</sup> <i>Panzer</i> | 137              | 122 |
|                            |                  |     | <i>Ariete</i>                  | 129              | 125 |
|                            |                  |     | <i>Trieste</i>                 | 34               | 34  |
| TOTAL                      | 979              | 734 |                                | 527              | 426 |

All was well. And if the group of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and *Ariete* was still south, it would be even better.

Meanwhile, since mid-morning, the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. was trying to expand the conquered salient, pressing insistently on the Kidney, and it had made to flow the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. behind the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. despite the furious artillery bombardment of the XXI Corp. These efforts were of course thwarted by the ACIT, however, again von Thoma preferred to launch a series of counterattacks premises where they were demonstrating the dangers of penetration. Kidney intervened in the sector of the II/8th *Panzer*, the IV and the LI/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank; the two Italian battalions had 30% of the tanks hit and killed and wounded, they lost a battalion commander and four of the company. Against the New Zealand suddenly they hurled the XII/133<sup>rd</sup> tank with the DLIV Semoventi group and a *Panzer* group.

Essentially reactions unrelated in time and space were carried out against the Australian 20<sup>th</sup> Bd., who on the other hand recorded individual actions against the 2/13<sup>th</sup> and 2/17<sup>th</sup> *Battalion*; against the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd., which suffered very serious losses by artillery; against the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., who received the brunt of drafts, losing and wasting many armored vehicles; against 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., that dissolved quickly the reaction remaining where it was. In the afternoon, any ambition gradually stopped. One thing was certain: was it right or wrong for von Thoma use what was his reserves, the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp could not fight their way. Maybe the next day, after the night attacks planned, the Australian to conquer hill 28 and for the Scottish the elimination of *Aberdeen*, *Stirling* and *Nairn*, the three cornerstones of *Oxalic* which the 51<sup>st</sup> Inf. Div. was not in charge, there would come calling more conducive circumstances.

Late in the evening, between the hours of 23:00 and 24:00, the Australian 26<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. and three Scots brigades left their starting points. A few kilometers further south the 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., Retired to the east of the Miteiriya ridge at the fall of darkness, was starting a large circle to join the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. Even further south, fighting in Deir el Munassib was underway.

The area of Deir el Munassib was manned by the 187<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Folgore*, deployed on its southwestern part. The IV paratroopers was in what might be called safety zone, but with the major task of first resistance; had two companies facing the southern edge

of the depression and the third front to the east. The IX battalion was placed in *February* and occupied the cornerstones of the position of strength. To the north it was placed the II battalion (sketch n. 91).

We do not know exactly the British operating design. Fact is that the attack appeared in the later stages. The first attempt took place in mid-afternoon and was implemented by the 4/8<sup>th</sup> Hussars of the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Arm. Bd., preceded by dismounted sappers. He was directed along the southern edge of depression and clearly doomed to failure: given the full light of day, the minesweepers were quickly dispersed and the tanks, proceeding on two columns aimed to first invest the 11<sup>th</sup> company (a hundred men with 47 mm. guns), and the other the 12<sup>th</sup> (one hundred and twenty men with three 47 mm. guns), presented formations so that collected in less than an hour anti-tank weapons and artillery of the *Folgore* had good game to stop the action and to lead retreat with the abandonment of twenty unusable tanks.

At 21:00, after a intense fire of preparation, the 69<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. presented, supported by tanks. The VI *Howard Green*, approached the under the shelter of smoke, burst into the heart of the stronghold, but the brave and aggressive resistance of the centers of fire survivors served to wear down and to slow the penetration so long as finally was arrested around 04:00 in front of the Company Headquarters trench defended by eight paratroopers. The pause allowed the action of the small break for the battalion and the establishment of a line a little rearward. Instead, the V *East Yorkshire*, who pointed to the 12<sup>th</sup> company, was not even scratch in the center advance and towards one o'clock in the morning, after losing 150 men, was forced to abandon the attempt.

That evening the historical journal of the XX Corps ended with a sentence summarizing the physical and moral condition of the troops: "*Will reacts as you can to enemy action, which remains very violent with use of very broad means.*" But there was good news: in late afternoon Rommel had reached the Command of the ACIT.

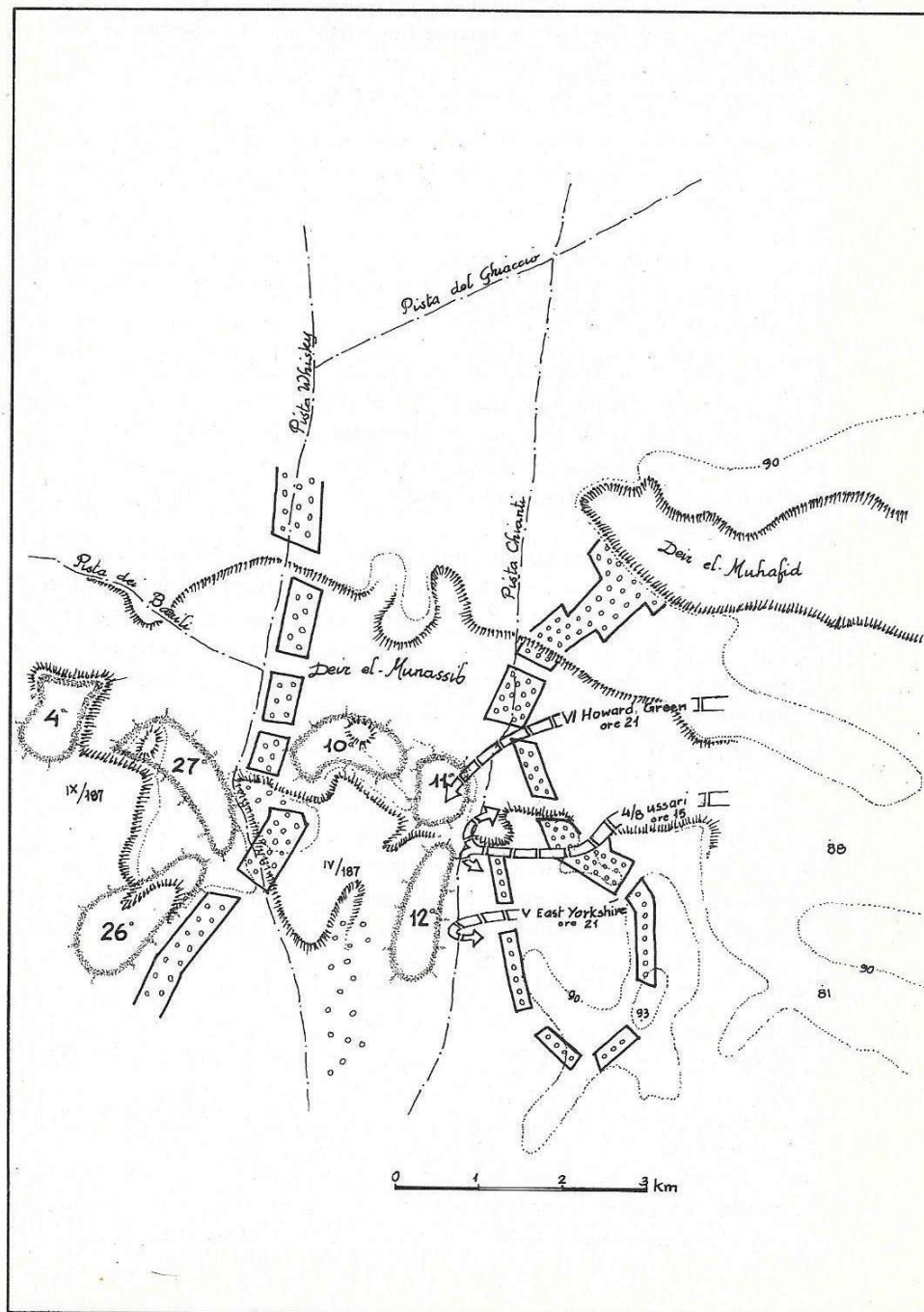
## 2. THE RETURN OF ROMMEL

At about 11:00 of the 25<sup>th</sup> Rommel landed at Ciampino airport. He awaited Gen von Rintelen that, pending the continuation of the flight, bring himself current with everything that was going on in Egypt. The salient fact was the constitution of the breakthrough - for now contained - in the central part of the area of the *Trento* and the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. Nasty business, but the

The second battle of Deir el Munassib (25-26 October)

IL SECONDO COMBATTIMENTO DI DEIR EL MUNASSIB  
(25-26 ottobre)

Schizzo n. 91



the imponderable part of the battle. Other interested Rommel and even more of the tactical situation: how much gas there? The response of von Rintelen froze him: the ACIT seemed to have just three units of fuel (that is, for three hundred kilometers of road)!

"I was greatly saddened – he wrote later - because my departure there were still at least eight units for the army of Egypt and Libya, and even that was absurdly little in comparison with the bare minimum of 30 units. Experience had shown that it was necessary 1 unit of fuel per day of battle; Failing this, the army remained paralyzed and was unable to react to the moves of the enemy."<sup>(16)</sup>

Mindful of the dramatic hours that had forced the abandonment of the Battle of Alam el Halfa, Rommel was probably the feeling that the end is near "*Fearing we'd have to fight this battle with little hope of success - he remembered - crossed the Mediterranean in my Storch and dusk I reached my command.*"<sup>(17)</sup>

Here he learned the details of the death of Stumme, whose body was found in the afternoon. Shortly after von Thoma and Westphal to brief him on the battlefield. Then began the account losses, with specific reference to the northern sector, and examining the state of stocks. Please note that during the absence of Rommel the enemy had sunk between thirteen steamships and motor ships, a tanker and three tugboats traveling for Africa.

The XXI Corp, always commanded by Gloria but for which you knew imminent the return of Navarini, recorded the *Trento*, reduced to a couple of battalions and two artillery groups, and the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., 70% of the initial force. The 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* currently possessed thirty tanks and the *Littorio* a hundred. The X Corp had a new commander, gen. Nebbia, just arrived from Italy. Its losses were limited, apart from the *Folgore*, and seemed to hold up well on the offensive. Even for the *Ariete* and the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* losses were irrelevant. The *Folgore* had lost about five companies (average force of about 120 men each), but the report of an officer of the command corps said: "*Folgore* Morale: wonderful."

With regard to the dispositions of the enemy, in front of the *Trento* and the German 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. were calculated three infantry divisions and two armored in the first row and two infantry and one armored second row. According to the information office, from the north in succession the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian, the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand and the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian with the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored (two brigades)

the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored and the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Brigade. Behind them were ready to intervene the English 51<sup>st</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa with the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored.

At the center, in front of the *Bologna*, were the 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. (Two brigades a Greek and English) and 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd., To the south, in front of the *Brescia* and the *Folgore*, there were the 44<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., the 1<sup>st</sup> French Inf. Bd, the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. and the 4<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. A reconstruction is not exact, but that it shook the veins and pulse for the northern sector. Basically it was confirmed the absolute superiority in the opponent's air force, artillery, armored vehicles and in fuel and ammunition<sup>(18)</sup>, and did not seem unlikely that Montgomery was willing to impose a battle of attrition knowing that it was unsustainable for the ACIT.

Here entered the dance the eternal and unsolved problem of supplies, that now, at the beginning of a decisive confrontation, it appeared in distressing tones. The army possessed only 1.5 day of fuel. Just under it existed in the Tobruk-Benghazi, that is not far away from El Daba, but not around the corner; it was still 600 and 1,000 km of road with two downsides: consumption for the dual path and the long exposure to aerial attack. Coastal and rail transport Tobruk Sidi Abd el-Rahman could certainly help, but their limitations were apparent.

This poor availability tied hands in an unacceptable manner, because the mobility of the tank units in combat appeared literally compromised to the point of allowing simple local counterattacks with the parts of the reserves on hand. As if that were not enough, even for ammunition straits were heavy. Rommel knew, appalled, that in the night of the 24<sup>th</sup> Stumme had "*forbidden*" to open fire on the British bases starting to save shots and, therefore, "*the enemy was able to take over part of the minefields and overwhelm the defenses with relatively mild losses.*"<sup>(19)</sup> Frankly, a ban on so drastic is not being given. Undoubtedly orders for firing advisedly and fears of a inadequate supply and not timely may have influenced in some way some artillery commands, but it is likely that much more serious was the negative weight of the interruptions in the transmission network and British artillery bombardments on the alignments of the ACIT.

## 26 OCTOBER.

The beginning of the offensive had so far given importance to three areas: that of Kidney, the area of El Wishka and depression of Munassib.



To these he added another: hill 28 south of Bir Sultan Omar, the objective assigned to the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. as hill 29 and always denoted as hill 28 to avoid confusion. This trigonometric point will quickly become a key battlefield, even if by some scholars will be incorrectly identified in the small depression of Kidney.

The morning of the 26<sup>th</sup>, at around 05:00, Rommel returned by command car to hear the news of the night. And there were many novelties, just about the hot sectors.

For the 8<sup>th</sup> Army's attack in hill 28 certainly constituted the most important action among those scheduled in the circumstances. Morshead had already thought of something like this on your behalf, so the order of Montgomery not caught him off guard, and the organization of the act tactically managed easily. Moreover, in the early hours of the 25<sup>th</sup> the Australians they had had a stroke of luck: the accidental capture of two German officers approaching recklessly the enemy lines. These were the commanders of the 125<sup>th</sup> Inf. and the II Battalion of the same regiment, in possession of marked topographic maps. The commander of the 125<sup>th</sup> Inf., talking freely, confirmed what had already been identified by the *Intelligence Service*: his battalion occupied hill 28, the I<sup>st</sup> blocked the road and rail and the III<sup>rd</sup> was at the coast. Moreover it was found the placement of minefields in the area.

The task of conquering the goal it was for the 26<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. Gen. Whitehead had only two battalions (2/24<sup>th</sup> and 2/48<sup>th</sup>), the third being retained by Division headquarters, in return he received the 40<sup>th</sup> Tanks with thirty *Valentine* and a large fire support: the three Australians field regiments from plus two others field and a heavy as reinforcement. Apart from the shooting Counter-responsibility of the Army Corps, the six regiments in question had to shoot 14,508 rounds of 25 lb. and 1,066 of 5.5 inches. Naturally, the *Royal Air Force* had a part reserved: its *Wellingtons* had to drop 115 tons of bombs in the area of combat.

In summary: a few mines, the overwhelming power of fire, good balance of power of infantry. The attack had to succeed. In fact it succeeded, after a quick and bloody melee. The 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade had 56 dead and 256 wounded and missing, and division captured a total of 173 Germans from the 125<sup>th</sup> Inf. and 67 Italians of the *Trento* (the remains of the I/62<sup>nd</sup> Inf.).

Kidney also things went substantially well for the Scots, but so incomplete and much more dearly. For the 51<sup>st</sup> Inf. Div. it came to occupy in good time the three objectives of *Aberdeen*, *Stirling* and *Naim*, occupying its stretch of *Oxalic*. The first

of them, that is the eastern part of the Kidney, was blocked from the first day of the I *Gordon* of the 154<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. although supported by a squadron of *Valentine* and, despite repeated attempts, which began at 23:00, when he was very able to remain where he was perched. Upon *Stirling* the V *Black Watch* of the 153<sup>rd</sup> Inf. Bd.: approached cautiously and was surprised to find the position manned only by the dead. Moreover, the first light of the 26<sup>th</sup>, you will notice that you have a German division entrenched in not more than fifty meters. As for *Nairn*, the VII *Argyll and Sutherland* of the 154<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. had the toughest job and it had to win the position with the next and hardest assaults with bayonets and high losses.

Instead, as we know, the game ended with a clear English fiasco in Deir el Munassib. The two brigades of the 44<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. had lost about 700 men.

This is the picture that Rommel obtained from the information of the night. The fall of hill 28 had been feared by the XXI Corp Command, that since the previous night had ordered the XI/7<sup>th</sup> Bers. to move from its location to the south-east coast of Sidi Abd el Rahman, to Bir Sultan Omar. The action to recapture the ground since lost by the II/125<sup>th</sup> /Inf. It was given to units of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and the *Littorio* with a strong support of artillery. "Unfortunately - Commented Rommel, who wanted to watch the fighting – *the attack gained ground only slowly. The British put up a desperate resistance*"<sup>(20)</sup>. And the formation of the *Royal Air Force* continued to bomb the battlefield, following one another at intervals of one hour.

That being the case, Rommel decided to gather more forces to the north, making the Kasta group flow from the far south of the front, from the 580<sup>th</sup> Rec. Bn. from Matruh (where it would be replaced by 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon. Bn of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*), the 90<sup>th</sup> Light from the area of El Daba, the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and a battle group from the southern sector of the *Ariete*.

Meanwhile, as the interventions of the parts of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and the *Littorio* kept the situation locked between hill 28 and the Kidney (II/8<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, II and IV/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank, and DLVI semoventi group) and to El Wishka (I/8<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, XII/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank, DLIV semoventi group and the XXXV/12<sup>th</sup> Bers.) the infantry of the XX Corp, whose command was taken that day by Navarini, he arrived to restore a satisfactory resistance line almost close to the ridge Miteiriya.

But the strain was sensitive. On the 26<sup>th</sup>, the dead amounted to 307, the injured to 919 and the missing at 2,429, a slight prevalence Italian. The efficient medium tanks were 187 M.13 and M.14 and 121 Pzkw III and IV

(Including 65 type *Special*). The evening bulletin of the ACIT was eloquent:

"Among the troop registering certain signs of exhaustion: this is not only due to the intense artillery fire and air superiority of the enemy, but also to the fact that many Italians and Germans fighters, who were in North Africa for more than 18 months can not resist more fully the hardships. "

Among the worst losses of that day unfortunately figured the "sinking of the tanker *Proserpina* (2,500 tons. Gasoline) and the vessel *Tergeste* (about 3,000 tons. Of ammunition and 1,000 of food:

"The fuel situation - reported even the **Bulletin** - is still tense as ever (...). The situation requires ammunition to further economies that account for a large test for the troops, in front of the high consumption of British ammunition. "

And Cavallero noted in his diary: "*Now the problem is to see what is done to remedy.*"

If Rommel that day confirmed the painful impression of a struggle without concrete hopes, for Montgomery it was one of deep reflection. The offensive of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army seemed to come to a standstill, in the sense that the attempt to break through by the infantry had failed and that the part of the armor could not overcome the barrier of the anti-tank guns. By a rough calculation the British losses in personnel and tanks were double those of the Italian-German: 6,140 killed, wounded and missing at about 3,700, and 300 medium tanks out of action against 150 <sup>(21)</sup>.

These figures itself could not be alarming because, in the end, the human losses were not excessive and Rommel, Montgomery knew now that he had taken command, was left with 400 tanks while the 8<sup>th</sup> Army had 900 efficient, one hundred of 10<sup>th</sup> Corp in repair.

But they came to the tactical possibilities and about the main commanders did not show much conviction. Freyberg wondered if his New Zealand would be able to perform other "*major attacks*"; Wimberley had lost 2,000 men, mostly infantry; Leese had a significant comment: "*we were a hair's breadth of losing control of the battle*" <sup>(22)</sup>. In return, Montgomery was not even touched by the doubt of not winning. The break did not happen, what remains is to find the best way to achieve it.

The center of gravity of the effort was to remain in the north, since the attack of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp as planned -which subsidiary contained itself the power to determine a great success - it had proved insufficient to overcome the *Folgore*, and given the uncertainty of its increase to the detriment of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp. So he might as well give up the original plan, assign a static task to Horrocks and recover the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div..

For now Leese had completed the conquest of *Oxalic* for him to consolidate immediately, so no worries to resist a big contrast from the ACIT and support the next upswing of the offensive. Lumsden was responsible for the security of the bridgehead built by the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp and, in this context, was to improve their accommodation over the area of the Kidney towards *Skinflint*. Horrocks was to disengage the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., which had remaining 70 *Grant*, 27 *Crusader* and 50 *Stuart*. On this basis Montgomery gave orders to the commanders of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp and the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp about what could be done in the night on 27<sup>th</sup>.

But it was not enough. After another long hours of meditation, the evening summoned Leese. He had decided a break to regroup forces differently: new reserves needed for the continuation of the offensive in the north, where the results of the Australian in the night of the 26<sup>th</sup> suggested the possibility of a decisive move. "*If I could reach behind the enemy that held the main coastal road - he later explained - I destroyed or captured a large core of the Germans and maybe I could open up a line of action along the coast.*"<sup>(23)</sup> First he had to recover the New Zealanders.

Meanwhile Freyberg and Pienaar had another enterprise to accomplish: complete and give breath to the occupation of the ridge Miteiriya. The attacks of the 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Brigade of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and South Africa, the usually well supported by artillery, sank heavily in the II and III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. and the German II/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf.. Between 19:00 and 21:00 the renewed intensity of the British fire forced the battalions of Trento and the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. to retreat to positions of chance, with high losses. And the counterattack exercised by a mixed group armored did not obtain concrete results, both for the prompt enemy consolidation and due to yet another bombing raid.

While the fighting was still going on, Leese, returned to his own command, gathered the regements and explains the situation. He posed the need to maintain the initiative, and then to keep the pressure on the ACIT, otherwise the battle became useless. "*For some days* - He said - *the Australians had to attract as many*

*enemy forces as it could, threatening to surround the coastal pocket and gain access to the coastal road behind the minefields*"<sup>(24)</sup>. This would allow the withdrawal from the front of the units to form the new shock mass and that is the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., The 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div. and the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. Once retrieved, these divisions would be revitalized and reordered quickly. The success of the recovery, limited initially to the New Zealanders, was to be facilitated not only by the Australians, who would distract Rommel north, but also from inevitable changes in the responsibilities of the front, with a general shift northwards.

In other words, the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian focused on the narrow stretch of hill 28 more and leaving the 24<sup>th</sup> brigade between Tell el Elisa and the sea; the 51<sup>st</sup> Scottish moved in the sector of the Australian 20<sup>th</sup> Brigade; Command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand with a 151<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bd. of the 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. and the New Zealand artillery assumed the defense of the sector of the *Highlanders*; the 1<sup>st</sup> South African was in place of New Zealand in the northern ridge of Miteiriya and the 4<sup>th</sup> Indian passes to the employment of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp, occupying the South African sector. The movements should be completed by the dawn of the 28<sup>th</sup>, then in two night arcs. And therefore it was necessary that the Australian attack would begin that night.

Apart objection of Pienaar, to continued toss in a mischievous intervention of Freyberg<sup>(25)</sup>, the plan to move in thirty-six hours something like 60,000 men, with thousands of vehicles, was accepted without flinching.

## 27 OCTOBER

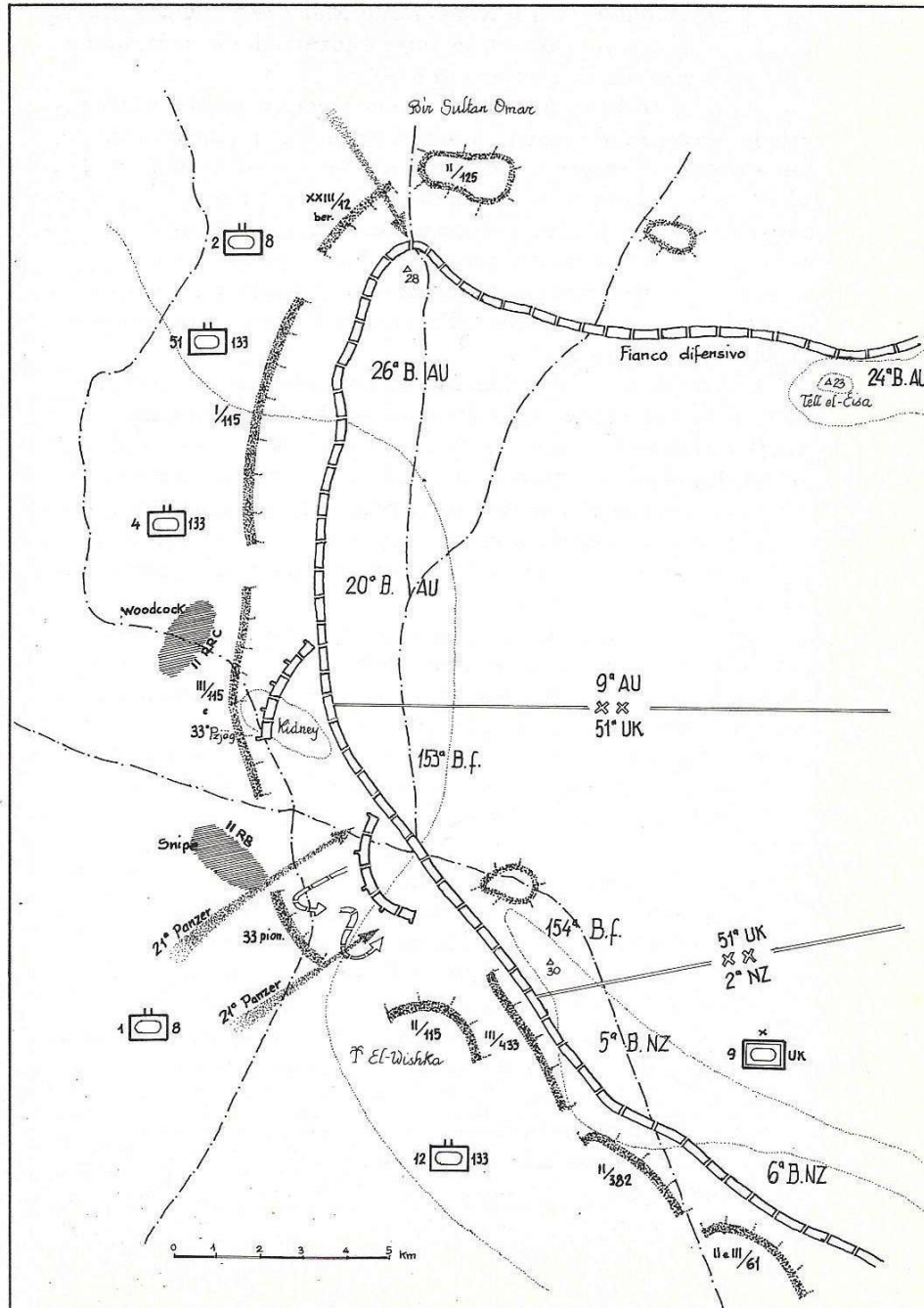
That night in Gen. Briggs wanted to push his 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. over *Oxalic*. To open up beyond Kidney had to occupy two positions, one in the north-west and the other to the southwest, respectively designated by the conventional names of *Woodstock* and *Snipe*. He thought to conquer them with the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. of Bosville; then he would use the locations as bases for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. (Sketch n. 92).

Aerial photographs showed the presence of barbed wire and anti-tank guns and you had to take for granted the possibility of reactions from armored. After several discussions on the exact topographical location, being the two goals simple pieces of desert, the action took

### The attack of the English Arm. Div. to *Woodcock* and *Snipe* (26-27 October)

L'ATTACCO DELLA 1<sup>a</sup> D.COR. INGLESE A WOODSTOCK  
E SNIPE  
(26-27 ottobre)

Schizzo n. 92



off before midnight, in the wake of a massive mobile curtain. On *Woodstock* moved the *II King's Royal Rifle Corps* with a battery of the 76<sup>th</sup> Anti-tank artillery; on *Snipe* the *II Battalion of the Rifle Brigade*, also with a battery of 6 pounders.

The first goal was completely missed, because, after the weak resistance of advanced elements of the German I/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. and arranged in the dark a hedgehog, at the first light of day the battalion of KRRC realized it lie south of *Woodcock* and moreover in an unfortunate position. Then retreated somewhat. Failure to occupy the objective made Gen. Fisher very cautious, so his 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., Left around 06:00 and hampered by Italians and Germans elements, came to halt at midday at the height of the Kidney, facing the German III/115<sup>th</sup> Inf..

The *Snipe* affair had a very different texture and subsequent increases kept it open until the night of the 29<sup>th</sup>. Even in this circumstance the attacker stopped erroneously to a thousand meters to the southeast of the objective, shortly after 23:00. The opposition encountered was still poor and twenty German prisoners made up the loot. Consequently they were called forward the base of fire with 6 pounders guns, heavy machine guns and 3 inches mortars.

A first intervention of a German armored group at 04:00 went wide and a second, led by XII/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank, the DLIV Semoventi group and the 33<sup>rd</sup> *Panzerjager* BN. around 06:00, had no better fate because of strong anti-tank deployment. It consists of about twenty pieces of 6 pounds. Around 07:00 a move of the 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. of Kenchington; approximately to the *II Rifle Brigade*, confused him with the enemy and, taken place a couple of kilometers away, he began to shoot him. The misunderstanding clarified, he reached and surpassed the riflemen, then bending south.

From this time and throughout the day was a series of confrontations of varying degrees. For von Thoma, who led the fight, it was a raid of the English 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. on a position of strength (it could be said the tinkering achieved) while undermining much of the III/115<sup>th</sup> Inf. ; the raid of stopped first by the artillery of the ACIT and then by a series of units of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and *Littorio*. These actions culminated in a counter-attack launched in the early afternoon by the increasingly threadbare II/8<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and the IV/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank with a Semoventi battery. Summing up, the DAK appeared that the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. remained attached to the ground, just to the west of Kidney, but in a precarious position because with the two

battalions isolated; that the 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. had been rejected with several tanks out of action; that 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. It had gathered at the height of the Kidney and the 51<sup>st</sup> Inf. Div. remained well placed to defend.

For Briggs, despite the 200 tanks engaged, the events had not given the desired results, because of the two points of support for the progression over Kidney, only one was reached, even if not topographically and anything but firmly; also one of the two armored brigades had thrown in the towel. In exchange, the II *Rifle Brigade* was acting superbly and wear on the armored forces of the Axis was blatant.

Now, in mid-morning radio intercepts they had led to Briggs alarming news: the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* had flowed from the south during the night and was now focusing west of the Kidney. Confrontation considered inevitable, began to bring in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. to the *Rifles*. As had happened the 24<sup>th</sup>, also the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade took his unlucky battalion under fire, who had to suffer to clarify the error again. Just in time to face the largest counterattack of the day.

Also in the morning, the XI/ 7<sup>th</sup> Bers. had attacked hill 28 conquering the western edge but at the cost of 50 dead and 150 wounded on 450 men. The general situation of the sector was relatively improved, while the movements ordered by Rommel the day before it ended: the 90<sup>th</sup> Light had come with the mass of the units south of Sidi Abdel Rahman; The 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, less a battalion of the 104<sup>th</sup> *Panzergranadiere* and a company of *Panzerjager* remained available to the XX Corp, had come to the west of El Wishka; a battle group of the *Ariete*, consisting of the IX/132<sup>nd</sup> Tank and the VI Semoventi group, was west of the Kidney. Anything placed Rommel in conditions at attempt resolute action against major enemy salient of hill 28 and the Kidney to “*reestablish everywhere the line of resistance.*” The first objective was assigned to the 90<sup>th</sup> Light with the help of a battlegroup of the *Littorio*; the second with all of the efficient DAK forces and XX Corp on site.

At 15:00 twenty *Stuka*, escorted by fighters, made their way to the British positions, but, faced by sixteen American *Kittyhawk* and twenty-four English *Hurricane*, the formations of the Axis were quickly forced to retreat. The start was not promising. Von Sponeck led action in the sector of hill 28 with the 155<sup>th</sup> Inf., The XXIII/12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri and LI/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank. Seemed to emerge on the first signs of success, but soon the intervention of ninety bombers



of the *Royal Air Force* and a tremendous barrage and interdiction crashed any ambition.

To clean the area around Kidney, von Randow took the I/5<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment* and I/104<sup>th</sup> *Panzergranadiere* of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and a battle group of the *Littorio* (the remains of the XII/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank and the semoventi DLIV group); followed the group of the *Ariete*. Here, too, the failure was complete. An even more terrible stop fire pinned the advance and disrupt formations. The distance duel between the tanks was won by the *Sherman* and *Grant*. "In principle, there is little chance of success for an attack of tanks on land where the enemy is organized in defense; but we could not do anything else," Rommel admitted bitterly<sup>(26)</sup>. Now, to devising some way to a defensive line, he must also use the valuable armored units. More Rommel could not tell von Thoma, when they told him at 20:00 the results.

To complete the picture as part of the XX Corp, it should mention the fighting renewed by New Zealanders and South Africans, in the afternoon, at the south-west of the pocket K. Although this was local tactical acts, the II/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. was badly reduced and II and III/61<sup>st</sup> Inf., merged into a single unit for the losses incurred, resulted almost completely annihilated. He resisted desperately little more than a company of 61<sup>st</sup> Inf., Connected to his right with the German II/433<sup>rd</sup> Inf. but devoid of backup to the left. While waiting to close the interruption, the II/382<sup>nd</sup> Inf. He was commissioned to push patrols to the aforementioned company.

That evening the historical journal of Deleuse recorded that "*the enemy attacks today in the north produced a slight inflection in our lines in the area a few kilometers north of El Wishka.*" The diary of the XX Corp spoke of "*a struggle with ups and downs*" and declared that the material of the *Littorio* destroyed amounted to 16 tanks, 4 self-propelled and 5 pieces of 88, concluding that the physical and moral condition of the troops "*still very shaken by the violent action enemy.*"

No denying that the gravity of the situation increased operational. The position of resistance was crumbling, the infantry kept so sometimes truly amazing, the armor could not reduce tumors. The defense in the Kidney and west of the Miteiriya ridge appeared in conditions of unstable equilibrium; at hill 28 the Australians had won a local advantage harbinger of concerns for units deployed in the coastal sector. Any attempt to counter seemed destined to remain so because of the excessive power of the enemy aviation and artillery. The levels of the

stocks of ammunition and fuel coming down more and more. Within the ACIT it existed only 1.7 *unfoc* and another between Tobruk and Benghazi. On 1.3 *unfoc* of Tripoli there was little to be counted. The availability of fuel was around a day and a half and calculating an arrival of 60 tons every day you could get by until 31, that is still just four days! The influx north of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* had resulted consumption relatively heavy and it was hard that, if necessary, it was possible to postpone towards the Qattara Depression.

That evening Rommel sent an SOS to Rome and to the headquarters of Fuhrer, but without much hope. It was clear that Montgornery would continue to destroy the ACIT piece by piece, taking advantage of his immobility and taking advantage of the wide margin of superiority in forces, materials and resources.

In Rome Goering had come and that day, at the Palazzo Venezia, was held a meeting of clarification. Kesselring took a critical tone, expressing "*some doubts about the attitude of Marshal Rommel, that he judged undecided.*" Frankly, such tendentious judgment appears more than unfair, since it does not appear that Kesselring has clarified which causes, in his opinion, would have caused the indecision of Rommel. Goering smooth edges and asserted that "*there are reasons to think that the armored army does not take, provided they get timely supplies.*" All they agreed and each for his part - Cavallero, Goering, Kesselring and even Mussolini - promise something<sup>(27)</sup>. No one was touched by the thought that perhaps supplies of fuel and ammunition, also flowing in large quantities to the ACIT, would not be enough to give him victory, given the tremendous shortage of planes, tanks, cannons, vehicles and men. They probably would not even be enough for a timely retreat aimed at preserving the efficiency of the ACIT. However, among those people who would have dared to speak of the retreat?

Headquarters of Hitler, where the focus continued to be polarized on Stalingrad, the request immediately to send to Egypt by air the 47<sup>th</sup> Inf., located in Crete, was refused: because of the limited availability of transport aircraft, the ACIT could obtain or supplies or soldiers, not both. In any case, for the 47<sup>th</sup> Inf. nothing to do because they have not yet been reorganized.

**28 OCTOBER**

At the morning Montgomery gave a report to Leese and Lumsden. The news of the night were not shining. For many hours the conflicting communications coming from the red hot zone of the Kidney had alternated with radio silences. Only dawn was possible to reconstruct the events.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. had to be replaced by the 10<sup>th</sup> on 28 October. As a preliminary act Gatehouse had therefore ordered that his 133<sup>rd</sup> Inf. Bd. (Gen. Lee) took the place that night of the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd., completing or better winning *Woodcock* and replacing the II *Rifle Brigade*. Obviously the organization made a rushed mistake, so many things went wrong. Given that the clashes followed one another in the Kidney and the difficulties of orientation had created a situation greatly confused (even Italian-German historical diaries reflect uncertainties of all kinds), Gen. Lee, arrived in an absolutely unknown, it did not obtain reliable indications neither from 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., nor from the 10<sup>th</sup> and even from the 51<sup>st</sup> *Highlanders*. To compound the circumstances and to persuade Lee that his bosses were kept under pressure from Montgomery, it provided Lumsden and Gatehouse: the brigade was not to expect aid; enough "push ahead". Just a day would arrive the 8<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd.<sup>(28)</sup>

Lee had at the start the three battalions of the *Royal Sussex* towards 21:30 before moonrise. The V<sup>th</sup>, directed on *Snipe*, completely missed the direction and stopped, entrenching, in a place that had nothing to do with the objective. The IV<sup>th</sup>, moved late for various mishaps, he fell soon in a skirmish with the ... I<sup>st</sup> Gordon, who was in *Aberdeen*, right on the direction of travel. Discovered the error, the battalion went on its way, he had a company semi destroyed in an encounter with a more or less random enemy armored unit and finally, at 04:30, touched the eastern edge of *Woodcock*, rejecting the German I/104<sup>th</sup> Inf .. Except that, just at dawn, the sudden and decisive counterattack of units of the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer and *Littorio* in the area overwhelmed the IV *Sussex* who lost about 400 men, killed, wounded and missing.

While this was happening, and also the *Yorkshire Dragoons*, the motorized battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., Did not stand up well to the pressure of a battle group of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, two regiments of tanks from the same 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. were ordered to fall back slowly, causing bitter comments from the infantry. Further south, the II *Sussex* was literally pinned on the Kidney by Italian-German fire. The II *Rifle Brigade*,

initially taken for lost, he managed to break away on their own.

Montgomery, therefore, saw heavy fighting in those days, and "*began to realize that the losses incurred he had to be prudent.*" While I understand that the breakthrough was to be sought on the front of 30 Corp, "*at that moment I did not know exactly where.*"<sup>(29)</sup> However something was clear: useless to continue in the sector of the Kidney. So the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. could temporarily store the positions occupied in that section to be replaced, as soon as possible, by units of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp, while the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. is rearranged promptly.

The tactical action set for the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> seemed to lend itself to favorable developments. Montgomery spoke with Freyberg in the late morning: if Morshead had continued in a northeasterly direction he would enclosed in a bag the bulk of the German 125<sup>th</sup> Inf. and X/7<sup>th</sup> Bers. The next night, then, Freyberg would exploit the Australian success proceeding along the coast. We'll see how the design was altered in relation to the events.

Early in the morning Rommel wrote to his wife:

"(...) The battle is raging. Maybe we can still hold out, in spite of what we're up against, but it can go bad and the consequences would be very serious for the whole conduct of the war. North Africa would fall into the hands of the English in a few days, almost without a fight. We will do everything possible to prevent it. But the superiority of the enemy is terrific and our resources very scarce (...)"<sup>(30)</sup>.

And a discouraged letter, though not miserable. Almost all of the armored forces were reduced to the role of local reserves or even plugging the line. Infiltration could take place anywhere, especially at night, and nothing could be done if you do not rush anywhere with what was at hand. The efficient medium tanks amounted to 81 Germans and 196 Italians (67 with *Littorio* and *Trieste* and 129 with the *Ariete*). The fuel was rationed. As for ammunition, inventory levels had led to prohibit the use of long shots: it was necessary to shoot on observed targets and with gusts or short and violent concentrations.

From what we know of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, they were thought to have used 58 infantry battalions, five armored cars and light tanks and 15 medium tank, and not yet thrown into the fray 30 infantry battalions, two armored cars and light tanks and 7 of medium tanks. Calculating in consistency of 45 tanks for a British armored battalion and evaluating about

290 losses inflicted on the enemy, the remaining availability had to be about 700 tanks. Far too many for the ACIT. And the aerial reconnaissance had reported a number of vehicles have not yet been observed: 7,750 in the north, 5,000 and 3,500 in the central south.

Increasingly evident appeared to set a battle of attrition by the English; an attrition to achieve with uninterrupted attacks and massive use of aviation and artillery. Made sure of achieving a strong wear on the Italian-German, Montgomery would launch the decisive attack.

Now it was approaching the moment of the big decisions. In the early afternoon Mancinelli communicated to Deleaze:

"(...) Rommel very serenely judges the situation extremely critical for progressive wear on the forces against superiority enemy means & exhausting supplies no appreciable ammunition & fuel in use mobile troops according to their characteristics. The opponent pressure will be contained by any means until the very last option. No power but resistance could run out and in this case it is not even conceivable to think of retreat. According to his concept note, either Africa is held or the positions of Alamein lost. Then the Battle outcome is therefore depends on the flow of supplies to the front line" <sup>(31)</sup>.

Of course, at that point it was necessary that the Comando Supremo expressed their thoughts and Rommel said in no uncertain terms in the presence of Cavallero: "*Given serious situation I would be grateful if Your Excellency was soon at my Command to talk*" <sup>(32)</sup>. Late in the evening Barbasetti had to read the response of Cavallero with no small concern:

"It is my great desire to come to you soon. It is however required I push my staff here for measures that trust will be able to overcome ongoing supplies. Meanwhile I send you immediately General Barbasetti because he can immediately report" <sup>(33)</sup>.

You can not find a convincing validity to the reasons given by Cavallero not to rush to the front. He put the current von Rintelen, claiming to be his presence essential to the Comando Supremo to have a positive effect on transport: "*We must insist a lot - He explained - to get from the Navy what you ask*"! Yet, knowing Rommel, it was well understood that the appeal was caused by a reputed dramatic situation and the need to take decisions of vital importance. But, after claiming a rhetorical vein that "*the situation is saved here*," Cavallero made clear his true thought: "*If we were in Libya we could not help but rejoice*"

*with Marshal Rommel if things go well. And if they went wrong he would not need our advice.*"<sup>(34)</sup>

Meanwhile, Montgomery plans to play the game only in the north and the subsequent resolution of Rommel to bring into the northern sector the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and other units were leaving the southern front in a state of static defensive on both sides, except for local and sporadic fighting. However they caused several changes in the organization of command.

Gen. von Thoma took charge of the entire northern front, having employed by the DAK (15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*), the XXI Corp (*Trento*, *Bologna* and 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div.), the *Littorio* and *Trieste*, the latter which concentrated in the night close to Sidi Abd el Rahman. The 90<sup>th</sup> Light passing to the army reserve, with the Kasta and the 580<sup>th</sup> Recon. Bn. Gen. De Stefanis, on the other hand, was given command of the entire southern front, that is to say, X Corp (*Brescia*, *Folgore*, and *Pavia*), the XX Corp (*Ariete* and the *Nizza* Group) and Ramcke Par. Bd. So the battle group moved north of *Ariete* on the 26<sup>th</sup> was returned to his division. The squads *Nizza* group, made with the *Nizza* group (of the *Ariete*) from Matruh and the VIII Bersaglieri Battalion of armored cars (of *Trieste*) from Siwa, it was sent in the Naqb el Khadim, on the edge of the Qattara Depression.

## 29 OCTOBER

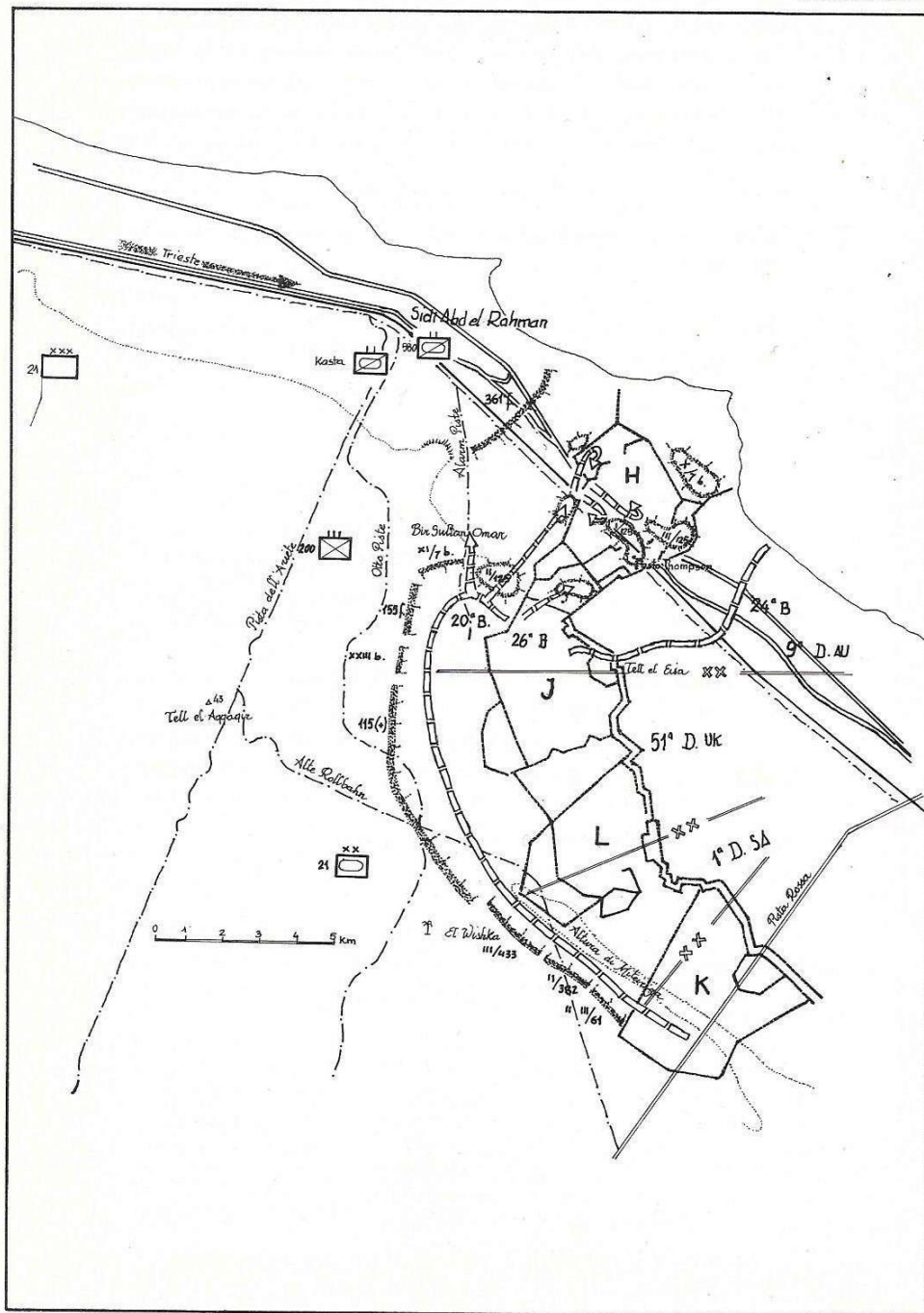
The bulletin issued by Deleaze the evening of the 29<sup>th</sup> gave the news that in the northern sector, at 23:00 of the night before, at the end of an hour and a half of intense artillery preparation, the enemy had launched a vigorous attack by infantry and tanks to the north of hill 28, with the usually formidable fire support. The attempt had been contained, while extending the fighting throughout the day. The prisoners taken belonged to the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div and the tanks to the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div.

In fact it was something much more complex, at least to the British 30<sup>th</sup> Corp. Conducting *Lightfoot* had made all the more marked the Italian-German salient of Tell el Eisa, to call it the best-known town, even if improperly (sketch n. 93). From the area of hill 28 to the coast, to the northeast, was held by XI/7<sup>th</sup> Bers., II/125<sup>th</sup> Inf., I/125<sup>th</sup> Inf., III/125<sup>th</sup> Inf. and X/7<sup>th</sup> Bers. At the rear, halfway between Sidi Abd el Rahman and the line was the 361<sup>st</sup> *Panzergranadiere*, straddling the railway and the coast road. To the west of hill 28

The attack of the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Div. (28-30 October)

L'ATTACCO DELLA 9<sup>a</sup> D.F. AUSTRALIANA  
(28-31 ottobre)

Schizzo n. 93



was the 155<sup>th</sup> *Panzergranadiere*. The topographic element most characteristic was the Post Thompson, a rocky domain of keen sight and shooting the surrounding desert. There stood a reinforced platoon of I/125<sup>th</sup> Inf.

The dispositions consisted of the Australian 20<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. with the 40<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* in the first row and the 26<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. with the 46<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* in the second row. A good 224 field guns and 48 medium-caliber accompanying the action. Starting from the height of hill 28, the bulk of 20<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. had to point directly to the north, protecting the left flank with the 40<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, and stop after a few kilometers, while a battalion took possession of a location south-west of Post Thompson. The possession of these two points would have unhinged the line XI/7<sup>th</sup> Bers. and II/125<sup>th</sup> Inf. and permitted the raid, always going north, the 26<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd.

The first part went well for Australians, despite heavy losses, but the entry into operation of the 26<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. sank into chaos. The brigade is among the ranks of the battalions of the 20<sup>th</sup> with the 2/23<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, part of which was mounted on *Bren-carriers* and the mounted on the *Valentines* of the 46<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, but the measure, designed to make come on the objective simultaneously infantry with the tanks, proved counterproductive. Visibility very low due to the dust raised, a minefield not known of the lack of reconnaissance, the crossfire of the defenders meant that after just five hundred meters the *Bren-carriers* and *Valentine* began to explode, the soldiers were forced to leap to the ground under a storm of fire and quickly the disconnect occurs. Made two or three hundred meters, everything stopped and Morshead decided to give up a plan clearly too ambitious. Of the 46<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* remained only eight tanks and Australians counted 27 dead and 290 wounded. But the two companies of XI/7<sup>th</sup> Bers. and II/125<sup>th</sup> Inf. were virtually annihilated. A push by part of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light did not change substantially unlimited success of the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian.

Rommel followed those six hours of fierce struggle. He tried to rest briefly, but at 03:30 it was back on his feet, surrounded by anguished thoughts:

"He seemed in doubt - He wrote -they resist very long to violent attacks such as the one that the British were unleashing and that, moreover, they were able to intensify. It was obvious to me that I should not wait a decisive breakthrough, but that I had to move quickly to the west. This decision, however, could not but result in the loss of much of the non-motorized infantry, and because the same infantry units were too closely involved in the combat.



So we had to try once again, with the tenacity and the irreducibility of our defense, to induce the enemy to stop the offensive. It was a faint hope, but the only fuel situation arose out of the question a setback inevitably framed in a maneuver in retreat.

However, if the retreat became obligatory, the main care of the army would be to bring as many tanks and weapons as possible to the west. Under no circumstances you could afford it expected to complete destruction in the Alamein. So this morning I decided that if the British pressure had become unbearable, I would be fall back to the position of Fuka, before the battle had reached its peak."<sup>(35)</sup>

Barbasetti, accompanied by Gen. Bernasconi, landed at the airport in Fuka at 10:40 and went immediately by car to the headquarters of the ACIT. Interview with Rommel remained present only Mancinelli and Westphal. After a couple of hours Barbasetti left for Fuka. Reserving the right to forward the report tomorrow by air, that night he took care to telegraph a more than significant synthesis to Cavallero:

"In summary our friend want to know the following: if enemy action were to continue with the current intensity for another two or three days, the ACIT can not, I say not, it would be able to withstand it. From this crisis you could save only with strong results urgent by aerial munitions, which today are consumed in excess of the arrivals, & fuel, because today is he is forced firmly maintain either limit maneuvering tanks, & men, including at least 5000 or 6000 Germans, to replace losses of the battered troops well but are subject to extreme wear and tear "<sup>(36)</sup>

The interview had been peaceful but firm. Rommel well assessed the gravity of the topics discussed, to the point of asking that what he stated was made known simply to Mussolini and Cavallero and remain secret. Barbasetti confirmed and he pointed out the program of the expected arrivals from Italy, the program went on the preceding day Major. Pistotti of the Comando Supremo. Rommel objected to that the inability to rely on supplies until they had really arrived in Africa. To exacerbate further the concerns had received the news that the tanker *Louisiana*, sent to Libya in place of *Proserpina*, sunk on October 26, had also been sunk. The state of irritation of Rommel surfaced during the interview, even if Barbasetti had the tact not to emphasize in the report sent to the Comando Supremo. To Gen. Bernasconi, who announced the arrival of 30 fighters, Rommel spoke a few words of thanks, adding: "*It is necessary that between a bomb and the other the enemies the fighters in the line can sometimes see one of our aircraft*".<sup>(37)</sup> However, through von Rintelen, the allegations came to Rome

"(...) Cruisers powerfully armed - Rommel remarked -and other ships whose cargo was supposed to come straight to the front, were still sent to Benghazi to save them from the action of the British torpedo bombers (...). Suddenly he wanted to now employ a large number of submarines, warships, civilian aircraft to transport and auxiliary fleet. If this had happened after the conquest of Tobruk, we would not be still found in front of El Alamein in late October."<sup>(38)</sup>

Cavallero noted: *"I inform Fougier that the reports had "Proserpina" seemed to have no protection from fighters. Rommel told me the thing with righteous indignation"*<sup>(39)</sup>, and got in touch with Kesselring. He had to, among other things, tell him that Mussolini relies heavily on him to win the battle would consider him one of the architects of victory.

Essentially, Rommel had argued with Barbasetti that:

"You can not break the fighting to escape the opponent: regardless of the scarcity of troops could withdraw (in relation to the lack of means of transport) is missing gasoline for maneuver. There is not but the solution to give battle to the end on the front of El Alamein ."<sup>(40)</sup>

Except that he harbored a vague mental reservation or had a sudden change of heart. Absolutely you do not want to imply that he held a secretive behavior, intentionally or not. It is considered quite normal that a head shake in his mind every possible hypothesis way out of a problem that seems to indicate only one possible solution and unwelcome. Rommel knew, as anyone who is not fasting for things military, which *in those conditions* remain in place could not be considered an option, but the resignation to an end more or less glorious. The trouble was that it would mean simply the end of the ACIT, but also in North Africa, with what would follow.

So we can not really accuse him of ambiguity about the fact that, after a quick breakfast, it is developed with Westphal verify the existence of a back line to be used for defensive, albeit in limited time. Being in the desert, the predicted "line" would of necessity result in a sufficiently narrow stretch between the sea and the Qattara Depression. West of the meridian of El Daba, to be discarded because they were too close to the area of the battle, it was to Fuka (close to 75 km), which presented the major advantage of the base of Matruh being behind. It could work. After all, staying at El Alamein was forced to conduct

expensive and devoid of convincing results: a series of sectoral counterattacks, and exhausting of local importance for the ACIT. If you were educated or caused a pause in the British offensive, perhaps saving a large part of the army it would have been feasible.

The decision with Westphal was interrupted by the arrival of a dispatch from Rome. The Comando Supremo, citing a trusted source, asked for news about the long range movement of two British armored divisions from the northern edge of the Qattara Depression and reported to a hundred kilometers south of Matruh.<sup>(41)</sup> We must say that it was not at all a novelty, because three days before the Comando Supremo had sent the same information, even indicating the presumed number of armored vehicles<sup>(42)</sup>, and the information office of the ACIT had judged as not credible, given the nature of the terrain depression, even at its edges. Rommel, however, believed it and, alarmed, took precautionary measures for the defense of Matruh. *"Do not spare anything, he said<sup>(43)</sup>. He calmed down only the next day, after multiple air and ground reconnaissance.*

In the evening he decided to retrieve the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer, engaged in the Kidney, replacing it with the *Trieste*.

Let's see what happened on the other side of the hill. *Ultra* had already put the Command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army aware of the sinking of *Proserpina*, the *Tergeste* and *Louisiana*. Overnight he continued to decrypt *Enigma* messages, informing that the previous day, the 13<sup>th</sup>, Rommel had turned to Kesselring to ask reinforcements given the *"extremely critical situation"* and that the OBS, *"considered the fuel situation of the armored army severely strained, "he ordered the transportation by air of petrol "by day and night until the last crew and the last plane."* The morning of the 29<sup>th</sup> October, made known the decision to Rommel to send all the vehicles available to take fuel to Benghazi, and issuing an order for inciting a supreme effort for a battle to fight *"for life or for death."*<sup>(44)</sup>

Everything was carefully weighed in the context of the development of *Lightfoot* in a meeting at the Command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. Alexander had arrived and Casey, Minister of State, driven by thinly veiled criticisms that began to circulate in London. Montgomery made a show very confident -and had good reason-and rejected any doubts, stating that they had budgeted ten days of fierce fighting. There were, indeed, several doubts as the

failure of the Australian did not let see a good move to get out of that threat of deadlock. Morshead seemed to continue be making headway against resistance even tougher. Gen. McCreery, who had accompanied Alexander, intervened in the debate and he pointed out strongly the need to change line of attack, leading to the south. This view also collected the approval of de Guingand, as well as the commander in chief of the Middle East, but Montgomery did not want to listen to reason, being to enter into an operation with both sides discovered, while to the coast would have been able to count on valid aid of the British ships. He bent down to a single concession: to postpone the continuation of the operation of twenty-four hours, that is, the night on the 31<sup>st</sup>, considering the state of tiredness of the troops.

Moreover, parties visitors, the news came, came from eavesdropping and from interrogations of prisoners, the three regiments of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light were somehow involved in the fighting with the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian and the *Trieste* had moved south of Sidi Abd el Rahman, to replace the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*. The information meant that Rommel expected new efforts in coastal and now no longer had fresh reserves: all units were now in line.

This, of course, changed the situation. Australians have taken action in the north, but not in order to make possible the development towards Sidi Abd el Rahman and beyond. Now it was necessary to persuade Rommel of the persistent British intention to open up the road on the coastal route. When all German-Italian units in the area were found to be engaged, the mass movement was to burst into the sector of the 51st *Highlanders*.

In essence, the new operational concept was based on a gravitation effort shifted south of hill 28 in order, among other things, to mainly affect the Italians (the *Trieste*, it is assumed). Morshead would resume the attack on the night on the 31<sup>st</sup> as a strong diversion; the next night Leese would take action Freyberg, no longer through the Australians as devised in the first place, but to the west, on a front of about four kilometers between hill 28 and the Kidney, until you reach the track of Sidi Abd el Rahman. In the shelter of the robust screen therein made by New Zealand, Lumsden would be deployed to do battle in the area of Tell el Aqqaqir. Beating the armored units of the ACIT, it would have gone to the station of Tell el Ghazal, at thirteen kilometers west of Sibi Abd el Rahman, so

to trap all the units located in the coastal sector. "*I made this decision at 11:00 on 29 October*" held to clarify Montgomery <sup>(45)</sup>.

In London, in the early morning, Gen. Brooke was hit by a very angry Churchill, who wanted to know what he was doing "his" Monty: in recent days had achieved little or nothing, and now it seemed that withdraw troops from the line. Why he had assured him that everything would be over in a week, if you did not intend to work hard? Possible that in Britain there was only one general who could win at least one battle? Brooke barely controlling himself, he said not exist reason to come to certain conclusions, but Churchill, running at, wanted a meeting of the chiefs of the GS and other members of the War Cabinet at 12.30.

Here, Brooke again defends Montgomery and had the good fortune to find a powerful ally in Smuts, before whose judgment Churchill finally quieted. But "*personally - admitted Brooke - I had my doubts and my concerns on the crease there and events could take; But I had to stifle within me (...). it was fortunate that a letter of Monty, when I confided his mood at that stage of the battle, I have not come on that day.*" <sup>(46)</sup>

In the afternoon, Churchill sent a message to Alexander ... congratulations and implicit incitement. Above all, the dispatch appeared excellent prospects for *Torch* and, therefore, for the campaign:

"1. The Defence Committee of the War Cabinet welcomes the brilliant and resolute way in which you and General Montgomery have sparked the decisive battle in progress. The Defence Committee believes that the general situation justifies all the risks and all the sacrifices connected to the unabated continuation of the battle; We assure you that, whatever the price, all the decisions that you take in order to destroy the army of Rommel and to fight this battle until the death will come to us fully approved.

2. (...)

3. (...)

4. *The following is intended only for you and Montgomery.* Clark has visited North Africa and spoke with French generals in our favor. We have reason to believe that not only meet little resistance, but we will draw considerable aid (...). For all we know the enemy has not the faintest idea of what awaits him, and not even the slightest suspicion or impressiveness of the imminence of the attack. (...) If your battle will continue unabated, it will contribute significantly to our victory. " <sup>(47)</sup>

**OCTOBER 30**

Since the opponent still seemed intent on reworking his dispositions, and slightly raised by the arrival of a ship with 600 tons fuel, Rommel wanted to go in person to examine the position of Fuka. Increasingly persuaded that the ACIT was not able to sustain the long - predicted new attempts to break through. The key point was the infantry, *"In the open desert the Italian infantry formations would have been a dead weight, because they practically had no means of transport."* To remove them from the front without the enemy immediately took advantage of the door left open at the center and south, was necessary to allow the British infantry to commit to fund the operation of break through, so as not to be immediately used for the exploitation of the flaw. At this point it was necessary to attempt to suddenly uncouple the Italian infantry under cover of darkness, how many troops can be loaded on vehicles and move them away as soon as possible and ultimately lead to the armored divisions and motorized maneuver retarding for salvage. Yes, maybe it was feasible. This thinking of Rommel. He thought that he informed Mancinelli with the same conviction with which the day before had argued the inevitability of resistance in place.

That same morning, and at the invitation of Field Marshal, Mancinelli informed the Comando Supremo and Deleaze:

"Rommel - wrote - he thought long interview yesterday, which together with the supervening tranquility acted as a good tonic. Reconsidered the issue of the possibility of an eventual retreat can be resolved positively if it can dispose briefly of 1,500 vehicles and fuel needed for the withdrawal of about 100 kilometers of infantry troops Italian and German, with arms and ammunition, including the division in *Bologna* down (ie to the south central part of the deployment). To the north would provide with its own means.

The stop line would be approximately twenty-eighth meridian [at Fuka], short, circumvent the south, next to our logistics base of Marsa Matruh. Please consider with breadth of vision can make available to him the above, taking into account that this is a temporary diversion of vehicles, which can depend on the salvation of the units and to respond immediately. It would probably be advantageous that the problem was then treated in detail by interview at the Command of the ACIT.

It is understood that the possibility of withdrawal is an extreme case that would become effective only in case of immanent danger of breakage of the front, meanwhile, remains unchanged while the decision to sit tight on current positions."<sup>(48)</sup>

The day passed in relative calm and also the operational activities of the *Royal Air Force*, hampered by adverse weather conditions, appeared significantly reduced compared to previous days. The interlude was used by the ACIT to perform movements and established movements. Taking into account the recovery of the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, to be completed by the night on the 31<sup>st</sup>, von Thoma divided responsibility between the front of the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and the *Bologna*. The first went from the sea to the Kidney including; the second up to the end portion facing the ridge of Miteiriya; the third remained where he was, that is, until El Mreir included. The new organization came into effect at 16:00, but since the 104<sup>th</sup> *Panzergradiere* had not been fully replaced by units of the *Trieste*, the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* would stay in the sector.

The 90<sup>th</sup> Light continued to gravitate toward the coast with reserve functions for the protection of Sidi Abd el Rahman. As for the Italian units, the order of the DAK stated, with delicate euphemism, they had to co-operate in the following way: the remains of the *Trento* and the bulk of *Trieste* (34 tanks efficient) with the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div.; 65<sup>th</sup> Inf. and *Littorio* (30 tanks efficient) with the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* <sup>(49)</sup>.

Montgomery spent the day to finalize the guidelines for the final effort, while the 10<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Corps were working feverishly to reorganize in view of the last act. The 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. was called to the north: had to rush on the night of 1 November, leaving in place the 4<sup>th</sup> light Arm. Bd.. Towards evening Freyberg, who was picking up the brigades supplied to him in reinforcement (the 151<sup>st</sup> of the 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. and 152<sup>nd</sup> of the 51<sup>st</sup> Inf. Div.), he observed with concern their weariness and asked Leese to defer the start of the operation of twenty-four hours. Attack the night on 1 November means facing without the drawbacks of a too hasty preparation. At about 20:00 the request came to Montgomery that greeted it, but without enthusiasm.

Approximately at that time the Australian 26<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd. renewed attempt north of hill 28. It disposed of four infantry battalions, one of the pioneers and the 40<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* and operating design was very similar to that provided for two nights before. It was the 2/32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. (ceded in reinforcements from the 24<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd.) to start the attack. At 21:00 he left the base, moving behind a massive mobile curtain and along the back side of the pocket H. met the remains of the II/125<sup>th</sup> Inf. and swept it after a hand to hand struggle; He reached and surpassed the railway and finally, at midnight, he touched the coast road: the troops of the axis, from Post Thompson to the sea, they were trapped. But by this time the wheel turned in favor of the ACIT

**OCTOBER 31**

The 2/32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. It had to be bypassed by the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> pioneers Battalion, charged with continuing to the coast. The pioneers met resistance of the rear elements of III/125<sup>th</sup> Inf., suffered losses and managed only to settle astride the coast road. The hitch delayed the two battalions in the second echelon, which, moreover, lost reciprocal linking. The result was that they advanced each for its own account towards the south-east, encountering fierce opposition of the German I and III/125<sup>th</sup> Inf.. At about 3 am, were both less than a hundred men, the two battalions went back to gather near the 2/32<sup>nd</sup>. Then it drove off in the direction of the sea the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> pioneers went against the positions of the X/7<sup>th</sup> Bers. and after the initial momentum abandons the match.

At dawn the remains of the 26<sup>th</sup> brigade were grouped in a small area at the astride of the railway and the rolling stock, beaten to the northwest by the fire of 361<sup>st</sup> *Panzergranadiere*. However, most of the 125<sup>th</sup> Inf. and X/7<sup>th</sup> Bers. They were cut off. When the 40<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* moved in turn to join the 26<sup>th</sup> Brigade, first he encounters the Italian CCCLVII group of 75 mm., whose men fought bravely falling on the ground or opening a path with weapons in hand; then he was struggling with the first German counterattack, led by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon. Bn., and then stopped.

Rommel had made a mistake keeping the dangerous and useless salient of the 125<sup>th</sup> Inf.. He could recall the troops and create a new line of resistance shorter, roughly the height of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, taking advantage of the manifest operational stasis. Otherwise, order to the 125<sup>th</sup> Inf. and to the X/7<sup>th</sup> bers. to be opening to the north-west, not just make the attack on the 26<sup>th</sup> Australian Brigade.

He had not, and on the morning of the 31<sup>st</sup> made a second mistake: Australian overestimated the extent of impact. Von Sponeck asked insistently to throw himself forward with all the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, sure to get a quickly clarifying result, but Rommel refused. He moved the Command of the ACIT eight kilometers west of El Daba -which was noticed by the troops-and tactical near the mosque of Sidi Abd el Rahman, and summoned von Thoma and Bayerlein, who on the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup> had returned from leave to resume his post as Chief of Staff the DAK, to order a sturdy counter with tank units. The morning bulletin issued from the ACIT said:



"(...) Enemy reinforcements made to flow continuously from the southeast to the point of collapse. Army intends to launch counter-attack around noon with a mass of the 21<sup>st</sup> armored division, tonight withdrawn from the front, from the area Sidi Abd el Rahman southeast to beat the enemy infiltrated & to free the 125<sup>th</sup> armored Grenadier Regiment. Division has already taken part once the fighting with all available forces. Although not on the rest of the face is outlined further attack enemy forces, it must be added very serious situation"<sup>(50)</sup>.

However, a little later, referring to the state of fact, Mancinelli stated: "*As serious situation is considered with serenity.*"<sup>(51)</sup>

The reaction operated from 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* lasted for a few hours. At 16:00 the contact with the encircled battalions was restored, but the Australians remained in the vicinity of the railway. Von Thoma and Bayerlein persuaded of the opportunity to withdraw the 125<sup>th</sup> Inf. from the trap, however Rommel persists in denial and ordered that the day after the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* continued to clean up the salient.

We must now open a parenthesis. It is mentioned in a communication made by Mancinelli to the Comando Supremo and Deleaze the morning of the 30<sup>th</sup>, on the new orientation of Rommel about the possibility of a withdrawal. As told by Mancinelli, Barbasetti returned to the precipice by Rommel bearing the clear opposition of the Comando Supremo to any case of retreat. Mancinelli did not specify the day of the interview - nor the strangest thing, he gleans mention in the historical diary of Deleaze -however how you expressed it should be considered to have taken place on the 31<sup>st</sup>. Based on his detailed description, he summarizes performance of the meeting. Rommel wanted explaining, justifying, their thoughts but Barbasetti snapped objecting to not have vehicles to be ceded even for a short time; all were used to carry supplies and the interruption, even partial, of this activity would otherwise be paralyzing to the ACIT. Ultimately, he repeats the very concept supported by Rommel on the 29<sup>th</sup>: nothing to do but stand in place.

"Rommel - described to Mancinelli - remaining very upset by this refusal. It haunts the concern could be forced by events to deal with the withdrawal. He was very sensitive to the charge that was paid last year to have sacrificed the Italian divisions to save those of Germany and will not be again in the same circumstances. The situation was one that we know and fully justified the darkest predictions and it was his duty to consider the possibility to rescue the army, of course without sacrificing Italians. This time then there were also German troops equivalent to about two divisions, lack in trucking.

Leaving the caravan where Rommel had its office and where

had done the interview, General Barbasetti tells me sarcastically: "*If we give also the vehicles, that is coming certainly*"<sup>(52)</sup>.

According Mancinelli, both the Comando Supremo and Deleuse denying vehicles materially slam the breaks on Rommel at the line of El Alamein, without taking any account of the great possibilities offered by thousands of kilometers of land suitable for a maneuver in retreat, but that interpretation seems rather forced: the drama of the vehicles was real and known. However Mancinelli, who fully shared the views of Rommel, attempted a compromise: asked were assigned to him for the same trucks gleaned need. He would have taken care of the distribution if and when needed. Barbasetti was not at all convinced and "*I probably judged infected with the defeatism of Rommel.*" So he just answer that "*possibly*" would have supplied in this way, if the need presented itself in all its concrete urgency<sup>(53)</sup>.

### 3. THE OPERATION SUPERCHARGE

Montgomery called *Supercharge* the jab that, in the words used in a letter to Brooke, Rommel would have thrown off the perch. All in all, it was a new revised edition of *Lightfoot*: breakthrough by infantry, with a penetration initially scheduled four kilometers deep and then, on the morning of the 31<sup>st</sup>, taken about six kilometers to throw into confusion more space in the defenses of the ACIT; next in rush of a mass distribution of armor and enemy armored reserves; Finally completes the disintegration in the enemy rear and of the whole ACIT<sup>(54)</sup>.

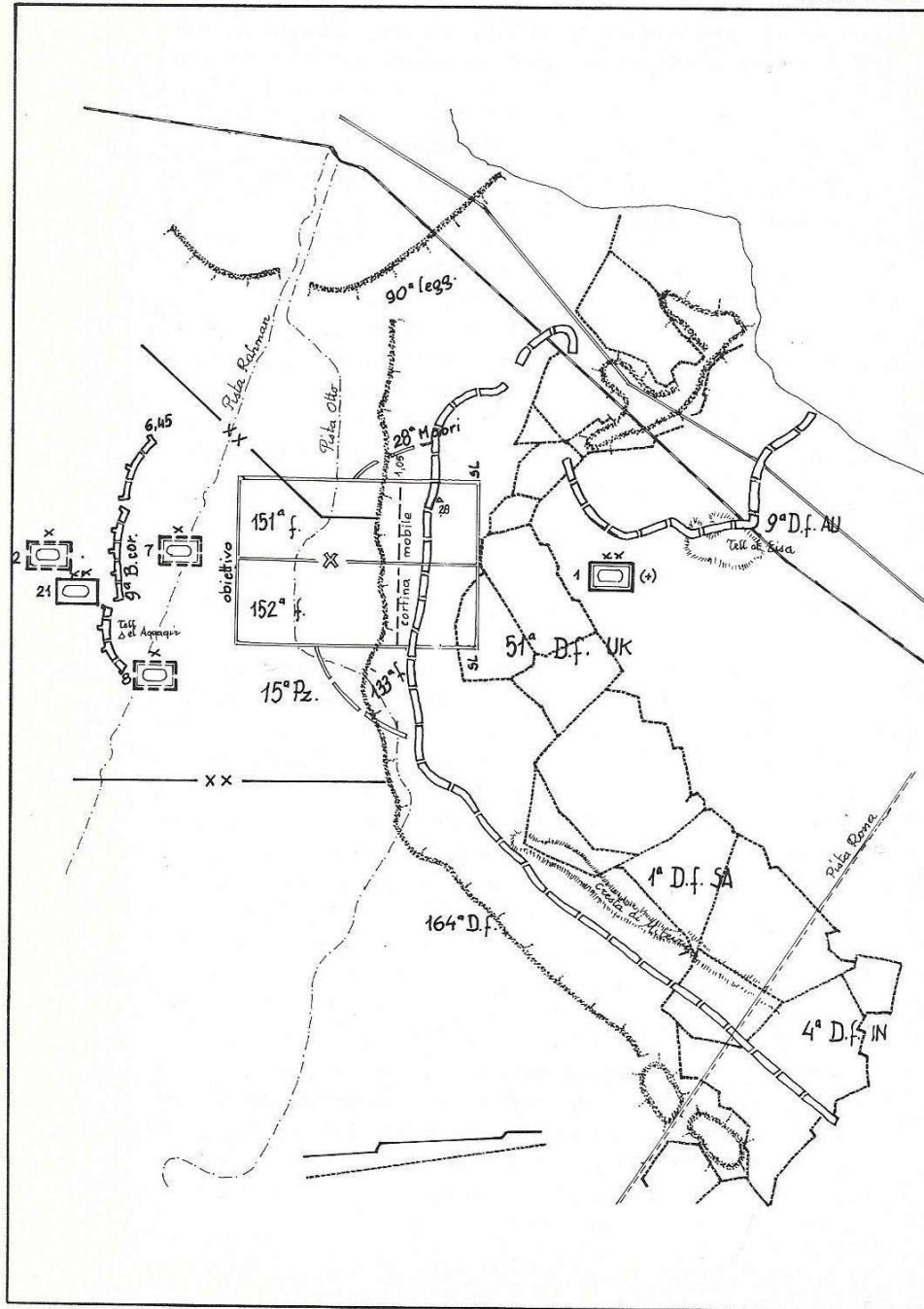
Of course there were many factors taken into consideration. Taking advantage of recent experience, it was necessary that the tanks would come into the field after the wide gap-almost four kilometers - obtained by the infantry had been swept of mines and made viable; not only that but, knowing only the approximate location of the anti-tank barriers and Italian-German static structures, also the advance of the armored brigades had to be preceded by a moving curtain. Since it was intended to provoke a fight with tanks, infantry was helpful that you bring at least a seven to eight hundred meters from the roadway of Sidi Abd el Rahman (sketch n. 94).

But as infantry use? It was not the simple identification

The proposed maneuver for "Supercharge"

IL DISEGNO DI MANOVRA PER «SUPERCHARGE»

Schizzo n. 94



units more efficient, but also as a commander and the General Staff. Montgomery chose Freyberg, however, could not ignore the claim made by these: "*I assume the command of any infantry unit, but do not make my New Zealanders attack again.*" The agreement was found with a strange compromise. The unit responsible for opening the gap would be made up of: the command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand, the 151<sup>st</sup> *Durham's* Inf. Bd., of the 50<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., the 152<sup>nd</sup> *Seaforth and Cameron* Inf. Bd., of the 51<sup>st</sup> Inf. Div., the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd. as well as for a specific task, the 133<sup>rd</sup> *Sussex* Inf. Bd. of the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. and the *Maori* Battalion. As artillery, Gen. Weir, leader of the New Zealand artillery, was available to all New Zealanders and Scottish regiments, one Australian, one of those of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. and two medium caliber, with a total of 192 guns, which would have allowed the most formidable moving curtain ever since World War I, while another 168 pieces will be dedicated to Italian-German strongholds and batteries. The progression was punctuated by an intermediate target, set at a few kilometers from the base. Speaking of which, it was decided to evacuate the imminence of the attack the forward positions, so that the 151<sup>st</sup> and 152<sup>nd</sup> Brigade not incurring in topographic errors at the outset.

It was mentioned to a particular task for the 133<sup>rd</sup> Inf. Bd. and for the *Maori*. In fact, they were instructed to get rid of two preliminaries hurdles: the *Sussex* competed the occupation of *Woodcock* and the *Maori* as a stronghold in the south-west of hill 28. Open the road, the 151<sup>st</sup> and the 152<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, reinforced respectively 8<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, each with forty *Valentine*, they proceeded until *Brandy* and *Neat*, their goals.

Then the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. would have bypassed the infantry and forced the German anti-tank barrier along the track of Rahman. Once past this barrier, Freyberg had handoff to Lumsden, who initially would use only the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. (2<sup>nd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. and 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd.) To exit into an open field.

It is a useful comparison between the two parties. The British had collected a mass of 487 medium tanks, as follows:

| Unit                      | Grant | Sherman | Crusader |
|---------------------------|-------|---------|----------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. | -     | -       | 6        |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd.  | -     | 90      | 66       |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd.  | 39    | 23      | 47       |
| 8 <sup>th</sup> Arm. Div  | -     | -       | 4        |
| 22 <sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. | 54    | -       | 26       |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd.  | 40    | 39      | 53       |

Since it was necessary to add 80 *Valentine* of the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, total in the north Montgomery tossed into the fray about 570 tanks. <sup>(55)</sup> They opposed Rommel's 240 according to 8<sup>th</sup> Army Intelligence, but in reality 167 (102 *Panzer* 65 and M 13).

Latest news donated by *Ultra* is presumably succeeded extremely pleasing to the Command of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. On the evening of the 29<sup>th</sup> it had revealed the German fear of penetration in the direction of Sidi Abd el Rahman; in the early hours of the 31<sup>st</sup>, that Rommel had recovered the 21st *Panzer* to employ it in favor of the troops blocked in the sector of Tell el Eisa, and that the *Trieste* had detected 21<sup>st</sup> the right in the front chosen for the break. At noon on 1st *Ultra* finally deciphered the evening bulletin of the ACIT of the 31<sup>st</sup> and was a further source of relief to know that Rommel intended to "*continue the counterattack on November 1 for the total liberation of the 125<sup>th</sup> Panzergrenadiere regiment*" and that does not discerned signs indicators of another British attack on the rest of the line. Last but not least, according to the situation mentioned by *Fliegerfuhrer* German efficient aircraft amounted to 36 *Stuka*, 50 fighters, 8 fighter-bombers and 10 reconnaissance. The morning of 1 November at 08:00, Montgomery established the program schedule:

|   |                       |
|---|-----------------------|
| zero hour   | 00:55 hours of 2 Nov. |
| start art. preparing  | 01:05 hours of 2 Nov. |
| Infantry conquest of objectives                                       | 03:45 hours of 2 Nov. |
| the 9 <sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. bypassing the infantry from              | 05:45 hours of 2 Nov. |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. Advanced                                    | 05:30 hours of 2 Nov. |
| 9 <sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. to override by the 1 <sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. | 06:45 hours of 2 Nov. |

The fight was to be directed by Freyberg up to 06:45, then by Lumsden. Even the first united the subordinate commanders and was clear in reiterating that the operation had to get through at any cost. When Gen. Currie said that overcoming of the foreseen anti-tank deployment on the Rahman track would push the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. losses to 50%, Freyberg said quietly: "*Maybe even more. The commander of the army is willing to accept 100%*". <sup>(56)</sup>

Later in the morning on Gen. Krause, commander of the ACIT artillery, returned from an accurate survey of the Fuka line with a highly favorable report about its use: the southern section was protected by a steep ridge can not be overcome by tanks and this allowed the sure gain a little time. Not

you know if, as a result of this information, the General Staff of the ACIT has put to work immediately to draw a blueprint of the retreat of the army, but it is very likely, given the implicit admission of Rommel:

"Presumably a nod to what we were doing came to a few channels to the Headquarters of the Fuhrer. In any case, he already knew-as later came to know -that we had prepared a plan in time for this ".<sup>(57)</sup>

As the British press seemed to have lost the enamel and the attempts of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp would continue to not get a real success, the very serious situation persisted. Rommel was very tense. As he wrote to his wife that evening, he had been a week since his return to Egypt, a week of heavy fighting during which more than once had been afraid of not succeeding. At the north face, where things were going really badly, only in the early afternoon he could breathe a sigh of relief thanks to the victorious counterattack of von Thoma, who had driven the Australians back south of the railway. But the physical and nervous strain was becoming more unbearable. As for supplies, something landed, "*but it is a tragedy* - He wrote -*that this aid reaches only when the situation is almost hopeless*"<sup>(58)</sup>.

At the highest level the state of affairs was undoubtedly felt heavy, but perhaps not in its actual size. The slight easing of transport crisis seems was confused with a noticeable improvement in the general level of supplies. Kesselring, to. example, had made a lightning trip to Africa -although evidently of little practical significance, since Rommel is silent in this regard -and to return to Rome (November 1<sup>st</sup>) went to Cavallero information altogether encouraging:

"Kesselring said - Cavallero noted -that if supplies continue with the current pace everything is in place. It seems that the British military authorities wanted to delay the offensive, but politicians have forced the timing to coincide with the commemoration of 28 October [!]. Rommel managed to hold available an armored division that he will make use of. Thank Kesselring of the great technical and moral support which he brought to Africa "<sup>(59)</sup>.

And the setback imposed on the Australians of the 31<sup>st</sup> the was so overvalued, inducing Cavallero to send a telegram to Rommel  
Inappropriate:

"The Duce asked me to express his deep appreciation for the successful counterattack by you personally conducted. The Duce also wishes to confirm

his full confidence that under your leadership the ongoing battle will be brought to a successful conclusion. "

In the evening, the DAK had altered the deployment (sketch n. 95). To the west of Tell el Aqqaqir he was collecting the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer*, less some detachments.

Basically, beginning *Supercharge* would invest directly four battalions (the I/200<sup>th</sup> Inf., the XXIII/12<sup>th</sup> Bers., the I/115<sup>th</sup> Inf. and I/65<sup>th</sup> Inf.) And indirectly the rest of the I/200<sup>th</sup> Inf., by the 28<sup>th</sup> *Maori* Battalion, and II/65<sup>th</sup> Inf. by the 133<sup>rd</sup> Inf. Bd.. Needless to calculate the ratio of local force.

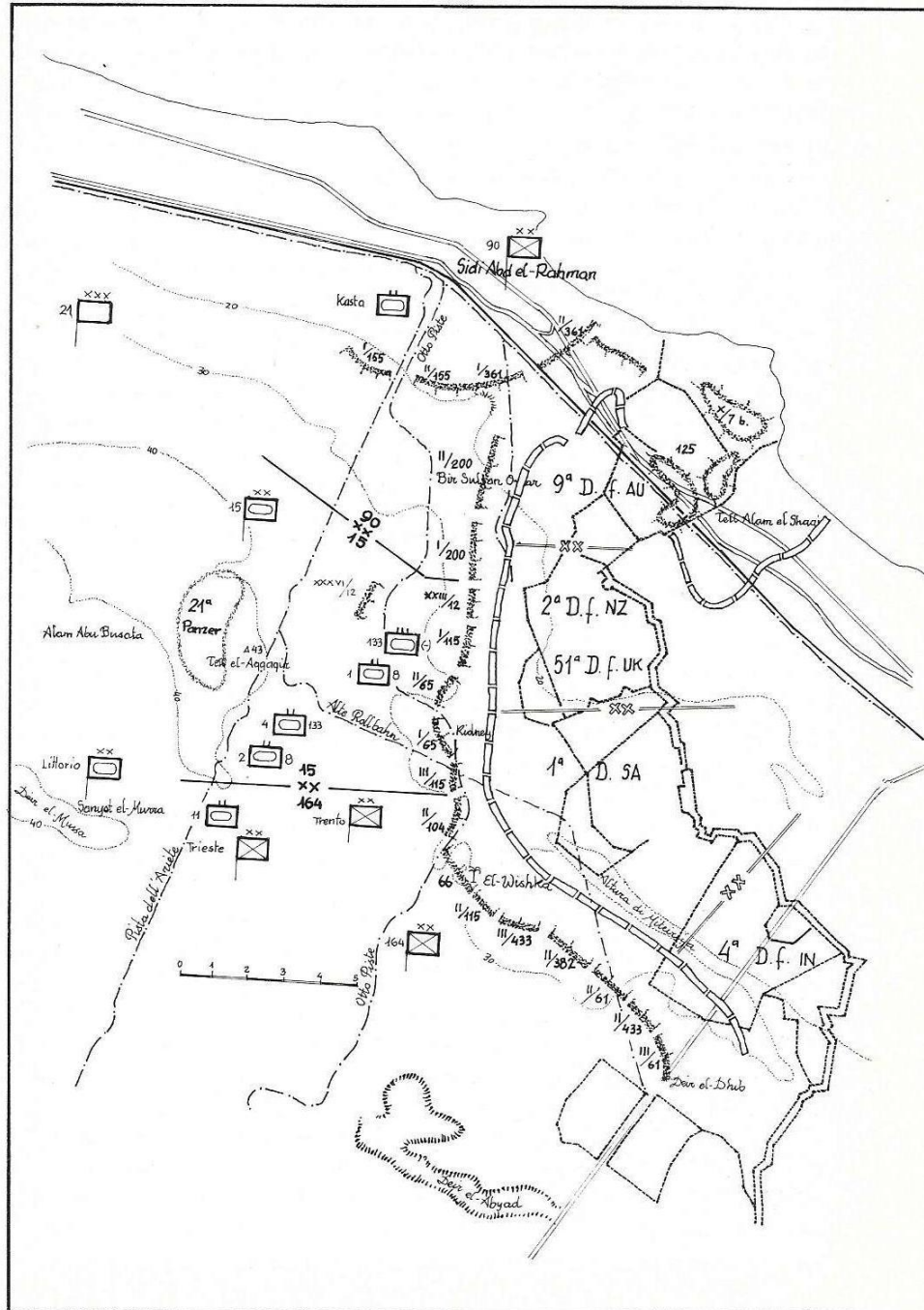
Barbasetti, meanwhile, he was trying to do something. He did not feel at all comfortable. Though not convinced, he was amassing 150 trucks with 50 trailers, sufficient for 3,000 men with unit weapons, the deprecated event of a retreat (but Rommel had asked 1,500!); available to start the XX Corp of twenty six medium tanks and self-propelled; He had alerted the *Pistoia* Inf. Div., that the positions of Sollum-Halfaya effecting the tenuous shaking with his hand: a battalion and a rifle company, a couple of groups of artillery and as many tanks and armored cars platoons. Two other battalions were engaged in garrison of Cyrenaica. Regardless of the extent of these troops, Barbasetti wanted to avoid any possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning of the tactical position: "*With the fact - telegraphed the Comando Supremo - I express the opinion indicated that line has now lost much of its value, taking into account that amount vehicles owned by British acting in the desert today allow large bypass .. its value today would only delay*"<sup>(61)</sup>. He wanted the *Spezia*, but Cavallero insisted that this remained available to Bastico, which was the reserve of Superlibia and the Comando Supremo, and promised, in return, to accelerate the sending of the other battalions of the *Pistoia*.

That evening, at 21:15, while Rommel wrote to his wife and Freyberg's units occupied the starting points, the *Desert Air Force* got into the saddle and held for seven hours holding forth. It was 68 *Wellington* and 19 *Albacore*, which repeatedly bombarded targets in selected areas of Tell el Aqqaqir, Sidi Abdel Rahman, Ghazal. Six tremendous explosions and twenty major fires dotted the bombing. If the cars showed themselves very sensitive to such offenses, infantry and artillery they had to suffer, even psychologically. The trouble for the worst ACIT was the disruption of the broadcasting system of DAK

The situation in the northern sector on the evening of 1 November

LA SITUAZIONE NEL SETTORE SETTENTRIONALE  
LA SERA DEL 1° NOVEMBRE

Schizzo n. 95





**2 NOVEMBER**

At 00.55 the British battalions in the first group went through the webbing that determined the starting line. Ten minutes later, right on time, broke the mobile curtain (a shell every twelve meters), advancing at intervals of two and a half minutes and swings hundred meters. Hell of explosions, smoke and dust, sometimes the sound of bagpipes came to the ears of soldiers as a familiar melody.

Before the roll of fire and the subsequent impact with the British infantry, the static structures of the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer not held. In a climate of resistance convoluted and desperate encounters with men dazed or in the throes of hysterical, the 151<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bd., reinforced by the *Maori* and 8<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*, swept the I/200<sup>th</sup> Inf. and XXIII/12<sup>th</sup> Bers. and at about 04:15 he reached the objective. He had just half an hour late on the roadmap. On the left, the 152<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd. passed through I/115<sup>th</sup> Inf. and II/65<sup>th</sup> Inf., the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* rejected with forty *Valentine* the twenty M 13 of the XII and LI/133<sup>rd</sup> Tank and then the I/8<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*. He touched the finish line more or less simultaneously with the 151<sup>st</sup> Brigade.

On the sides of the penetration, north the *Maori* Battalion finished eliminate I/200<sup>th</sup> Inf. and quickly set up a defensive side to the north; on the opposite side, in the area of the Kidney, the 133<sup>rd</sup> Inf. Bd. succeeded in occupying *Woodcock*, wrapping I/65<sup>th</sup> Inf. and blocking the III/115<sup>th</sup> Inf. .. There had been losses and difficulties, but the Freyberg's infantry had done their part. It was now up to the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. of Currie.

He left the gathering area near the station of El Alamein at 20:00 of 1 November with about 80 between *Sherman* and *Grant* and fifty *Crusader*. Each regiment was followed by a company of 14<sup>th</sup> *Sherwood Forester* and a anti-tank battery. The long march towards (eighteen kilometers) into the darkness and the extreme complexity of orientation because of the fuss, initially; the drawbacks of the way through a battlefield (such as mines, enemy artillery fire, direction errors, unforeseen obstacles) then, put the brigade in encumbrances before they take action.

Only 94 of the 132 tanks could start the fight; the others remained in the street for mechanical failure or damage of war. Many wheeled vehicles were out of order and losses in *Foresters* in some cases were severe. To remedy this stormy and unexpected principle and the consequent delay, Freyberg granted an extension of half an hour. So at 06:15 the batteries of the 30<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Corp gave off the curtain and moving the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. advanced with the regiments in line

in front, followed by 4<sup>th</sup> South African armored cars. The fire moved a hundred meters every three minutes.

Von Thoma had prepared an anti-tank array semicircular short distance from the line reached from 151<sup>st</sup> and 152<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, that is just to the east of the Rahman roadway, and a second to the west of the roadway. The latter were part of more than twenty guns 88.

The duel between the batteries and the waiting dug in Axis tanks and 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. the attack was epic and confused. The first impulse proved favorable to the English thanks to the darkness, loosening move the artillery fire. But as soon as the light of dawn deepened and, by sheer coincidence, he recorded a disconnect between curtain and armored formations, happened anything.

The approach of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., induced the DAK to reclaim space. Freyberg said that was "*a heroic and ferocious battle, which took place right on the line of enemy guns. Although the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade had not achieved its goal and had suffered heavy casualties, the action was a success because the barrier of the guns was smashed*"<sup>(62)</sup>. An exact feel of the hardness of combat can be provided by the observation of thirty Italian Germans anti-tank guns of various calibers found destroyed a hundred meters from the tanks burned, some of which almost behind the guns. The 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. He was left with just 19 tanks the survivors 132 original and the 94 with whom he came into contention. Ignoring the Axis losses in the specific fight, but the four infantry battalions including in the sector invested (two Germans and two Italians) could be considered lost and the units of *Littorio* engaged from the beginning very little remained. Around 10 am the commander of the 133<sup>rd</sup> Tank, wounded, he appeared to command division reporting that he had found him, without any prior notice by the infantry in front, the wave of British armor. The fight had turned bitter and confused in the middle of the formation, but the XII and LI tank battalion must have lost almost all their means and the DLIV *semoventi* group had disappeared.

It is also significant appreciation accepted by Rommel about the scale of the armored mass that had burst: 400-500 wagons with the New Zealand infantry and another 400 in the east of the mine fields <sup>(63)</sup>.

The fact is that the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. It had not reached the desired success <sup>(64)</sup>. According to forecasts, now the reaction of the DAK was coming from the north or west. Therefore, the objectives set for the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division of Briggs was Tell el Aqqaqir to the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., To shore of the southern end to the intended deployment of the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., And an area

about three kilometers northwest of the Tell the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd., that is to the west of the said formation. The 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. He had to place themselves on the back of the 9th Armored, centrally located.

Although Currie was arrested in the east of the track of Rahman, the objectives of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. remained unchanged. Briggs did not hide some concern about the delay more and more sensitive than the time program and especially the incomplete outcome of the operation of the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd.. Its task was the climb over at 06:45 and not to help him reach the line of Tell el Aqqaqir. The stop of Currie, dangerously close to the infantry, was causing an unbearable situation of confusion and hindrance to any movement; all at 7 am, in an area swept by fire every weapon.

Between 07:30 and 08:00 Freyberg called Leese three times. The first time to tell him that the 9<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. It was on its knees and that the moment was "very grave"; the second to encourage the advance of Briggs; the third to communicate that the two columns of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. had reached the advanced elements of the infantry, but enemy tanks were approaching from the north and was afraid to be no way out.

So, Briggs ordered his brigades exceed Currie's regiments, the track and point objectives. Easier said than do it. At 09:00 the German-Italian antitank deployment fronting to the penetration and that in the meantime had taken consistency warding off Brigg's scouts, while units of the 8<sup>th</sup> *Panzerregiment* attacked the right flank of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. and the 151<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bd.

The circumstances of general and specific in which took place the British night attack had, for a certain period of time, made it very difficult the reconstruction of events by the ACIT and the DAK. Three elements had complicated things: the interruption of the wire connections and the irregular operation of those radio; the deep incursion of a few squadrons of armored cars and light tanks, up to the west and south-west of Tell el Aqqaqir, in the middle of the night, causing disorder and damage to groups of vehicles randomly encountered<sup>(65)</sup>; an attempt to land at Ras el Daba rejected without many problems according Deleaze, actually simulated by the Command in Chief of the Middle East.

Of these three elements, the failures suffered by the broadcasting system had serious repercussions. At first, the ACIT had thought of a concomitant effort in favor of a repeated major attack against the sector of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light. Gen. La Ferla, who took very badly the crushing of his *Trieste* - the 65<sup>th</sup> Inf. He *collaborated* directly with the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, the 66<sup>th</sup> with the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., the XI Tank Battalion had been

inserted in the German 8<sup>th</sup> Tank, the 21<sup>st</sup> artillery (a group that had remained with the X Corp) part of the *Trieste* and received requests from the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. -in the course of the night several times asked news of the 65<sup>th</sup> Inf. At least up to the 03:00 the DAK repeated that the British attack took place north of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and this confirmed the news, adding that nothing abnormal was found in the sector of the 65<sup>th</sup> Inf.!

At about 04:00 von Thoma he realized that the affected section was really that of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, assuming it still involved in a maneuver aimed at Sidi Abdel Rahman. However, the communication from the area swept by *Supercharge* still coming inaccurate and confusing. Only certainty was the failure of the I/115<sup>th</sup> Inf., The XXIII/12<sup>th</sup> Bers. and I/200<sup>th</sup> Inf.<sup>(66)</sup>.

Von Thoma at 04:45 therefore ordered the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* would shift to the north-east to Sidi Abd el Rahman. It is difficult to say when the reality was fully understood. Probably for some time there was a clear sense of breakdown of the front, but it was hoped in the persistence of pockets of resistance more or less robust that they could facilitate the resection of the abscess. Suffice it to say that at noon the head office operations of the DAK will respond to the request for information of La Ferla that the battle was going "*north of the positions occupied by the 65<sup>th</sup> Inf.*," and that there were no news of either the German 115<sup>th</sup> Inf. or the 65<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the *Trieste*.

While overnight measurements tended to limit or slow the penetration, just made the day he wanted to cut it off or reduce it. Thus, at first he resorted mostly to reactions in which the immediacy made premium of a greater breath of intervention; reactions exercised by the units of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, the *Littorio* and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light. A few hours later the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* was thrown into the furnace.

At 09:11 the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Intelligence intercepted an order of von Thoma to von Randow: the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* was to attack from the north the 151<sup>st</sup> Inf. Bd.. Immediately Briggs, whose orders was also passed to Currie with what he had left, he organized a large defensive semicircle from Tell el Aqqaqir north saw the 8<sup>th</sup>, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> Armoured Brigade. Even the 7<sup>th</sup> motorized sided, covering the northern side. Quickly he took hold and a furious duel with artillery and anti-tank guns. The timing could not be called easy. In fact at 10:00 Freyberg called Leese on the phone and told him that the tide of battle all seemed nothing but favorable, and that the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. still stood in the midst of the infantry and the remains of Currie. It was clear disapproval of the slowness of the brigades of Briggs.

Montgomery himself wanted an precise outline and heard what was

the disposition taken by the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., arranged for the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. collection was held in the south of the 2<sup>nd</sup>. He was considering the picture that emerged from the welter of communications and eavesdropping. Nothing to say on the work of the troops of Freyberg: had virtually achieved the objectives assigned. Well even the Australians: the right of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp aroused concerns, although before a dangerous concentration of German forces. Who he was in some distress instead was the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp, unable to move forward, and when this had not yet found a real counterattack of DAK. On the other hand it was significant that Rommel had not reacted with his usual directness. In conclusion, Montgomery drew not only the confirmation of a clear breakdown of the opponent, but also one of his greatest weakness south of the breach, where he signaled the presence of tanks.

As a result, without even waiting for the outcome of the forthcoming big clash of armored formations, he branched out orders for the afternoon. The 30<sup>th</sup> Corp was to occupy a small rise of the desert about 2.5 kilometers south-east of Tell el Aqqaqir and almost as many in Southwest Kidney, called Skinflint, but not to be confused with the purpose of the same name mentioned in *Lightfoot* plan, with the Scottish 152<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd.; and *Snipe* with the 133<sup>rd</sup> *Sussex* Inf. Bd.. Leese was ready, however, to keep in reserve four brigades: the 151<sup>st</sup> *Durham*, the 154<sup>th</sup> *Scottish*, the 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealander and 5<sup>th</sup> Indian. The 10<sup>th</sup> Corp received the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div., Including the 4<sup>th</sup> light Arm Bd. that was to flow quickly from the south. At noon Montgomery returned to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Tactical Command.

Meanwhile von Thoma had launched the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* and 15<sup>th</sup> (with the remains of *Littorio* and the XI Tank Battalion of the *Trieste*) in a fierce battle against the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., Which had settled in defense with the tanks hull down, numerous anti-tank artillery online, a mighty mass of field batteries and medium caliber to support and comfort of seven raids of eighteen bombers of the *Desert Air Force*. They were about 120 tanks of the Axis against more than double of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., Not counting at least eighty *Valentine* of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks*. In this unequal duel, the M 13 were literally sacrificed in front of the *Grant* and *Sherman* and the 6 pounder guns. Rommel commented:

"The British blew up one after the other tank of the *Littorio* and *Trieste*. Italian 47 mm. cannons had no greater efficacy then our 50 against British tanks, and signs of disintegration began to appear among the

Italian troops. Units of *Littorio* and *Trieste* were routed to the west, no longer in the hands of the commanders' <sup>(67)</sup>.

Surely a few episodes of withdrawal will occur, but the expression of Rommel seems to dilate the incident. Note that the overall texture of the three battalions of 133<sup>rd</sup> Tank in the evening of 1 November, that is, before the initial *Supercharge* clashes, was around 38 tanks and that the only units still organic of the *Trieste*, the XI Tank battalion (27 Tanks), it was partially destroyed.

In the late morning Col. Westphal met at the Tactical Command of the ACIT with the chiefs operations officers of the three Italian Corps. Of the meeting, a possible retreat of the army on the line of Fuka. The preamble was circumstantial and not at all convincing the Italians could be certain that the battle would be taken up and won not just come reinforcements and supplies. Then Westphal came to the point. Not to alarm the defendants too, explained that, as twice Cyrenaica had been abandoned and retaken, so now would happen to Egypt. Germany being very busy in Russia (and then, it was understood, not being able to take care of Egypt) was necessary for the moment to predict the defensive back is strong enough to natural features and not circumvented to the South: Fuka. The retreat was not expected before November 5 and would be protected by the technique of folding maneuver by motorized forces. For each Corp were given routes to follow, reference lines, fields of work on the position of Fuka. Reserve orders for day and time of the start of the maneuver. Means of transport would provided by Gen. Mancinelli (not present at the meeting).

But events soon took another turn. The unsatisfactory outcome of hard and armored fighting at Tel Aqqaqir Rommel convinced that the end was near. In the early afternoon he decided to accelerate the process. He spoke with von Thoma and Navarini, called the Tactical Command of the ACIT, and gave the notice for disconnection. Meanwhile, following the failure of the counterattack of the DAK, as a first step, he ordered the influx to the north of the *Ariete*. The transfer was to take place during the day, so that at "6 o'clock on the third day the division is required to be well rested on the battlefield in the south of Tell el Aqqaqir." From the zero hour of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, De Stefanis resumed full command of *Ariete*, the *Littorio* and *Trieste*. At the same time, Nebbia took on the responsibility of the

southern front. In addition, during the night pocket H had to be evacuated by the German 125<sup>th</sup> Inf. and the X/7<sup>th</sup> Bers., to which were attached to new positions south-east of Sidi Abdel Rahman.

At 15:00 von Thoma tried again with the DAK, unfortunately without achieving any concrete results. Just before La Ferla, who could not accept the fate of the 65<sup>th</sup> Inf., Had sent two officers to the III/115<sup>th</sup> Inf., so from that stronghold were trying to reach the regiment. A couple of hours later they returned: von Vaerst, met by chance, had dissuaded them from pursuing because the enemy, penetrated to the north, now stood behind the 65<sup>th</sup> and 115<sup>th</sup> Inf.. The situation is finally clarified at 18:00, when the 152<sup>nd</sup> and 133<sup>rd</sup> Brigade attacked towards *Skinflint* and *Snipe*. The success smiled on them without much effort. The first came forward with the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* and the support of eight artillery regiments, the second without tanks but with as much artillery. Apart from the sharp shove that pushed the II/104<sup>th</sup> Inf. and the 66<sup>th</sup> Inf., there was more to the illusion that there was still something active in the large area of the British invasion. The physical exhaustion, material and psychological of the ACIT was beginning to weigh.

Late afternoon von Thoma reported to Rommel. Unfortunately air and ground superiority of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was becoming uncontrollable. He was left with 35 *Panzer* and a third of the guns 88, the only parts that really mattered against *Sherman* and *Grant*. As for the infantry, they had been reduced to less than half. Italian troops, armored units practically no longer existed, the infantry was shaken and worn as well as ill-armed, but you could still rely on artillery. He concluded by stating that the penetration seemed contained, but that is unlikely the troops could hold positions long today, especially seeing stationed almost permanently on the ACIT forty or fifty British and American bombers.

It is at this point that Rommel was convinced of the inevitability of retreat on Fuka, since the entire northern sector had been lost, including minefields and cornerstones. He asked what was the level of stocks, and in the light of the increasingly dire consistency residual gasoline and ammunition (kept coming news of the sinking of ships) and the dramatic shortage of vehicles, had no more hesitation and cut the Gordian knot. To von Thoma announced the task of DAK and XX Corp: resist until tomorrow and then move back fighting and as slowly as possible to save the infantry. Via short forewarned were then the Italian Corps (about 16:00 hours). At 19:30 the ACIT began broadcasting phonograms for the abandonment of positions since that night on the 3<sup>rd</sup>. X Corp must

fall back on old positions occupied at the end of August, before the Battle of Alam el Halfa. The centerpiece is the XXI Corp, with *Trento* and *Bologna*, had to bring up the track Rahman under the protection of the XX, which shall provide the vehicles! The DAK, north, straightened the left wing of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light. With these measures, the opposite would have regained an appearance of continuity and the premise of the next decoupling.

However, while in terms of troops there are no more hesitation, towards the High Command communications are not as clear.

Mancinelli, personally well regarded and considered by Rommel and the Command ACIT, was not kept informed of the events with the timeliness, accuracy and diligence that it was reasonable to expect from the allies. If intervention was deemed necessary to get something to Delease or to the Supreme Commander, Mancinelli was immediately summoned and questioned; if not, too often they cropped up little interest and rudeness. At about 20:00 he began to fill the *Comando Supremo* and Delease the *situation reported at 17:00*, based on the evidence that he was in possession. Therefore, it underlined the severity of the fighting, reported that Rommel estimated the enemy can power the offensive with large reserves, while the ACIT had almost exhausted their. Since it appeared problematic further resistance in the face of imminent and safe recovery of the attack, the field marshal had given preventive measures "*for any attempt to escape and fall back on positions already reported [those of Fuka]. This retreat will be ordered only in cases of extreme necessity*".<sup>(68)</sup>

Only by a dispatch posted did he learn of the executive order given by the ACIT, order that began with the sentence: "*The army is preparing to fall back step by step and fighting in front of a superior enemy force.*" Mancinelli of what unspoken specific news, because included in the evening bulletin of the ACIT.

For Rommel the real and huge problem was to accept that intention by Hitler. Well knowing how the wind was blowing in Rastenburg, wanted to go with feet of lead.

Let's start with the report sent this afternoon to the Headquarters of the Fuhrer:

"Despite today's defensive success, the forces of the army are exhausted after ten days of hard fighting against English land and air forces vastly superior. The army, therefore, will no longer be able to block the



strong enemy armored units that that are expected again, tonight or tomorrow, their continued attempts to break through.

The lack of motorized transport will make it impossible to retreat in good order the six Italian divisions and the two German non-motorized. Most of these units will probably be overwhelmed by the enemy mechanized formations. But our own troops are engaged in mechanized combat so hard that only a part of them will be able to disengage (...).

In this situation, the gradual annihilation of the army must be considered inevitable despite the heroic resistance and the unmatched spirit of the troops <sup>“(69)”</sup>.

It is easy to see that the real intentions of Rommel are carefully masked. Fearing a stiffening of Hitler, probably he tried to "get used" to the idea by degrees. In fact in the evening bulletin he puts the facts as they really were:

"(...) We count on further attempts to break through by the enemy in the next night, respectively, on 3 November. As has been reported with the second intermediate report [the one with the situation at 17:00] strength of the army is not sufficient to prevent further more attempt to break through.

Army prepares to retire at 03:00 current on, step by step fighting, the overwhelming enemy pressure. For this purpose infantry divisions will be withdrawn already in the night 2-3 power to bring them back later step by step (...)" <sup>“(70)”</sup>.

As this report was sent at 22:27 on November 2, recipients had to be confronted with a *fait accompli*.

Evidently both in Italy and in Germany the ventilated about Rommel's retreat, in the case of a worsening of circumstances, had been interpreted as a not unusual temporary manifestation of pessimism, especially since Kesselring had forwarded a little alarming report on the progress of the battle . In the afternoon Cavallero had received Kesselring and von Rintelen and showed them the message of Mancinelli with the news of noon, that is to say with the news of fierce fighting in the area of Tell el Aqqaqir and with the observation that the hundreds of British tanks were effectively contained by the ACIT <sup>“(71)”</sup>.

"I affirm –he wrote in his diary -which I understand that ours are tired, but the British should be to limit the effort. Add that Rommel is in the best conditions, because it forces gathered at hand. I think he has not less than 250 tanks. Marshal Kesselring agrees, but notes that there is a decline of 7 km. I say that this should not have caused the loss of the artillery (...). The situation, already serious, is now stretched to the extreme limit, but not hopeless and Rommel can still solve it.

To remark of Kesselring that Rommel had thrown in any reservation, Cavallero said: *"And the battle; He has petrol and ammunition. The enemy thinks of having run out of reserves and is the last effort, but the two conditions on which counted (exhaustion gasoline and ammunition), there were not"* and, referring to a planned convoy, he continued: *"If Rommel held and these [ transport] coming is the victory "* <sup>(72)</sup> Later, at about 21:00, arrived in Rome a telegram of Barbasetti, who asked for light on *"orders that Comando Supremo gave or intends to give to Rommel & especially for developments battle lines to keep in case of folding"* <sup>(73)</sup>. The response was immediate and Cavallero ... of absolute disengagement *"Battle is led by Marshal Rommel ... keep in close contact with him & sent frequent reports"* <sup>(74)</sup>.

### NOVEMBER 3

At 8 am Cavallero informed Mussolini of the news of the night: the aforementioned telegram of Mancinelli with the situation at 17:00 the previous day (arrived around 02:00) and the evening bulletin of the ACIT (arrived at 04:00). Ignoring the comments of the Duce <sup>(75)</sup>; the fact is that when at 08:45 Kesselring phoned the Comando Supremo to alert to be preparing to leave for Egypt, given the seriousness of the prospects, Cavallero was able to take place, at least as a point of view (!):

"I express the opinion that it is appropriate to maintain the current positions in Egypt because the ones mentioned by Marshal Rommel not lend themselves to the defense. Please Marshal Kesselring to exert persuasive action in this regard to Marshal Rommel " <sup>(76)</sup>.

After the two telephone conversations, Cavallero quickly reexamined the situation with his main collaborators. So he sent two messages, one to the G.S. connection with the ACIT, the other to Delesee.

"Please communicate to Rommel - wrote to Mancinelli –that the Duce deems necessary to maintain at all costs the current front as according to the notice of the Supreme Command Egyptian territory does not offer suitable positions except to stop & temporary resistance to reordering forces.

For extreme precaution Delesee have had already several days order base with few units & artillery positions available Sollum-Halfaya. This of course without taking any element to those who are destined to ACIT.

Supplies are pushed by all means, by air & by sea" <sup>(77)</sup>.

Everything gave notice to Barbasetti and this time much better expressed their thoughts about the conduct of the battle. In his view, he explained, it was necessary to continue the resistance to the bitter end at El Alamein. Having to fall back, the only natural line of defense was offered the position .Sollum-Halfaya. If Rommel had been forced to strike a maneuver in retreat from El Alamein and the border, he alone could decide. Kesselring, is about to arrive, he touched on this topic.

However at 10:50 he was cut the long message from Berlin to the German embassy in Rome to relay urgently to Rommel. The bulletin evening of September 2, the ACIT, received by von Rintelen at 02:00 and 03:00 immediately relayed OKW, was shown to Hitler only around 9 am for a mistake the officer's service. Accompanied by an explosion of anger, was countermand immediate:

"To General Field Marshal Rommel.

With full confidence in your personality and leader in the value of German and Italian troops to your orders, the German people following me with the heroic defensive struggle in Egypt. In the situation in which you find there can be no other thought than to continue to resist, not to give a single step in the battle and throw every weapon, every fighter that you may still have.

Significant reinforcement of air units will be sent in recent days to the commander in chief of the South. The Duce and the Comando Supremo will make every effort to make reach you the means for the continuation of the struggle.

Despite its numerical superiority, even the enemy will come at the end of his strength. It would not be the first time in history that the stronger will triumphs of the strongest battalions of the enemy. To your troops, however, you can not specify other way except the one that leads to victory or death. "

Mussolini was made aware of the message almost simultaneously by Cavallero and, officially, by von Rintelen and approved without hesitation the telegram from the Comando Supremo to Mancinelli for Rommel. No one asked if the decision to remain in place or was not compatible with the withdraw, in all probability, already in place.

In fact, during the night had taken place and carrying out the disengagement of the first retrograde towards the meridian  $85^{\circ}$  <sup>(78)</sup>, to the west of the alignment Tell el Ghazal - Deir el Murra, taking advantage of the absence of reaction from the British.

The X Corp had received the notice of withdrawal to Fuka at 17:00 of the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Since the phonogram was brief, Nebbia asked questions about the movement and, in particular, the time to reach the new positions. Unfortunately by the time the

German radio connection with the ACIT no longer able to make contact. However, the corps was able to make the disengagement and to retreat to *Pavia* and *Brescia* by noon on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, without many worries, as the moonlight and the short travel distance (fifteen kilometers) allowed numerous trips with the vehicles available. The same applies to the Rarncke brigade. The *Folgore*, however, was forced to abandon after destruction, much of the heavy weaponry, its equipment and the equipment.

Even the XXI Corp was life more difficult, since the infantry of the *Trento* and *Bologna* left completely with no transport, so that the 132 guns of 47 mm, had to be towed to arms and heavy weapons carried on the shoulders. The movement of the XX Corp towards Deir el Murra began early in the morning but as the *Trieste* was strongly engaged and *Ariete* had not yet come from the south, the recoil could be completed only in the night on the 4<sup>th</sup>.

In the northern sector, units of the German 164<sup>th</sup> Inv. Div., spread a little everywhere, went gathering south of Tell el Aqqaqir; -that the DAK rejected without much effort a messed action with the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd. at Tell el Aqqaqir - remained deployed in a semicircle from the southwest to the northeast of the town and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light merely to retreat to more direct protection of Sidi Abd el Rahman. On the coastal road they were set supports under the control of 90<sup>th</sup> Light: the German 125<sup>th</sup> Inf. of the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf Div. to Sidi Abd el Rahman, the X/7<sup>th</sup> of Bersaglieri of the *Trento* midway between this site and Tell el Ghazal, where he was taken the new I/39<sup>th</sup> Inf. of *Bologna*, the German 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon. Bn. and the new I/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. *Trento* to El Daba.

"The battle is taking place very unfavorably for us that night - Rommel wrote his wife - .We are simply crushed by the preponderance of the enemy. I tried everything to save part of the army. I wonder if I will succeed. At night I lay with my eyes open I find puzzling a solution to take my poor soldiers from this across an open sea.

We are facing very difficult days, perhaps the worst thing a man can bear. Blessed are the dead: for them it is all over (...) " (79).

Failure contrast from the British side and, consequently, the unexpectedly favorable conditions in which it was possible to realize the breaking of contact for many divisions induced to hope that, also performed the release of the DAK and of the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, ie the units more closely engaged, the withdrawal would be able to continue without excessive risks. But Rommel harbored reasonable grounds for concern about the decision of Hitler; not felt

quiet and feared that events in Africa were judged without an exact idea of the strategic framework, tactical and logistic. He settled therefore to start in the afternoon by plane his aide, Leut. Berndt, for the headquarters of the Fuhrer to explain in person that North Africa probably was lost, though he intended to avoid a fatal coupling and opposing instead of fighting a series of successive positions, as long as the circumstances they had not been allowed to accept battle or not until he could take on board all the troops taking them to Europe.

At about 10:00, bringing the advanced Command Post, he spoke with von Thoma: the DAK was left with thirty *Panzer*, but the opponent showed particular aggression. Assuming you were employed in a reorganization of the troops and that there was still a certain amount of time to exploit, Rommel took the decision to retire on Fuka. The movement was to take place by sectors, in order: northern, central and southern, with priority to non-motorized troops of the first two sectors, under the protection of armored units. The Ramcke brigade and X Corp would, for the moment, remained in place.

Raised for throwing the dice, Rommel returned to El Daba. Miraculously he escaped to an air raid, but when he arrived at the headquarters of the ACIT, after noon, probably regretted getting away with it. One after another they came as two gunshots the dispatch of the Comando Supremo with an invitation to "maintain at all costs the current front and that of Hitler with the only alternative to choose between victory or death"<sup>(80)</sup>. To Rommel was a blow. He did not dare disobey *sic et simpliciter*\* and tried a reply to the OKW it was set respectful and persuasive. After many attempts he decided for this text:

"With reference to the telegram of November 3, at 11:30, to inform you that during the night 2 to 3 November the Italian divisions and Ramcke brigade have retreated in the south of the alignment El Taqa Bab-el-Qattara south of Deir el murra in order to shorten the front. They have orders to defend to the last.

The German divisions are engaged in extremely heavy fighting in the northern sector against enemy forces greatly superior. They defend the area Deir el Murra -Sidi Abd el Rahman. All German units have already entered the fight. Currently the German losses in infantry, tank hunters and engineers account for about 50%, in artillery to nearly 40%. The DAK now has 24 tanks. of the XX Corp, the *Littorio* and *Trieste* have been virtually destroyed. The *Ariete*, which has so far remained in the south, reached in the night the DAK.

Any further effort will be made to remain in possession of the battlefield".<sup>(81)</sup>

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\*Latin: Thus and simply. Or Without further complication or elaboration.

Meanwhile, at 14:30, he asked more information on von Thoma, who, very dryly, told him that the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* could count on 10 tanks, the 21<sup>st</sup> of 14 and *Littorio* on 17. Rommel urged him to fight until all the last tank and read the message of Hitler, bitterly to von Thoma found a formula that seemed acceptable resistance positions, with some unavoidable local bending (sketch n. 96).

However it was necessary to suspend movement already willing, bring in line units, also bring the armored divisions and recover the X Corps (sketch n. 97). At 15:10 the ACIT transmitted orders to the XX Corp, but it soon became evident the impossibility of a timely and proper implementation. The phonogram came to the Corps at 17:00 and only 18:30 were disseminated, in sum, the subsequent implementing regulations to the divisions. For *Trento*, who had not yet left the positions, not existed difficulties, but for *Bologna*, things went differently. It was on the march since 14:00 and was not able to receive and decode the communication until arrival. Realizing this, Navarini did send officers on routes of retreat, but the Command of *Bologna* was not tracked, having decided to precede the columns to study the deployment to be taken on the line Fuka, and units were met only at dawn and after laborious search. As you can well imagine the troops were in such a state of exhaustion that they can not continue the journey in reverse. As for the XX Corp, the ACIT prescribed to settle the *Ariete* southeast of Deir el Murra, in contact with the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* to the left and with the *Trento* of XXI Corp to the right.

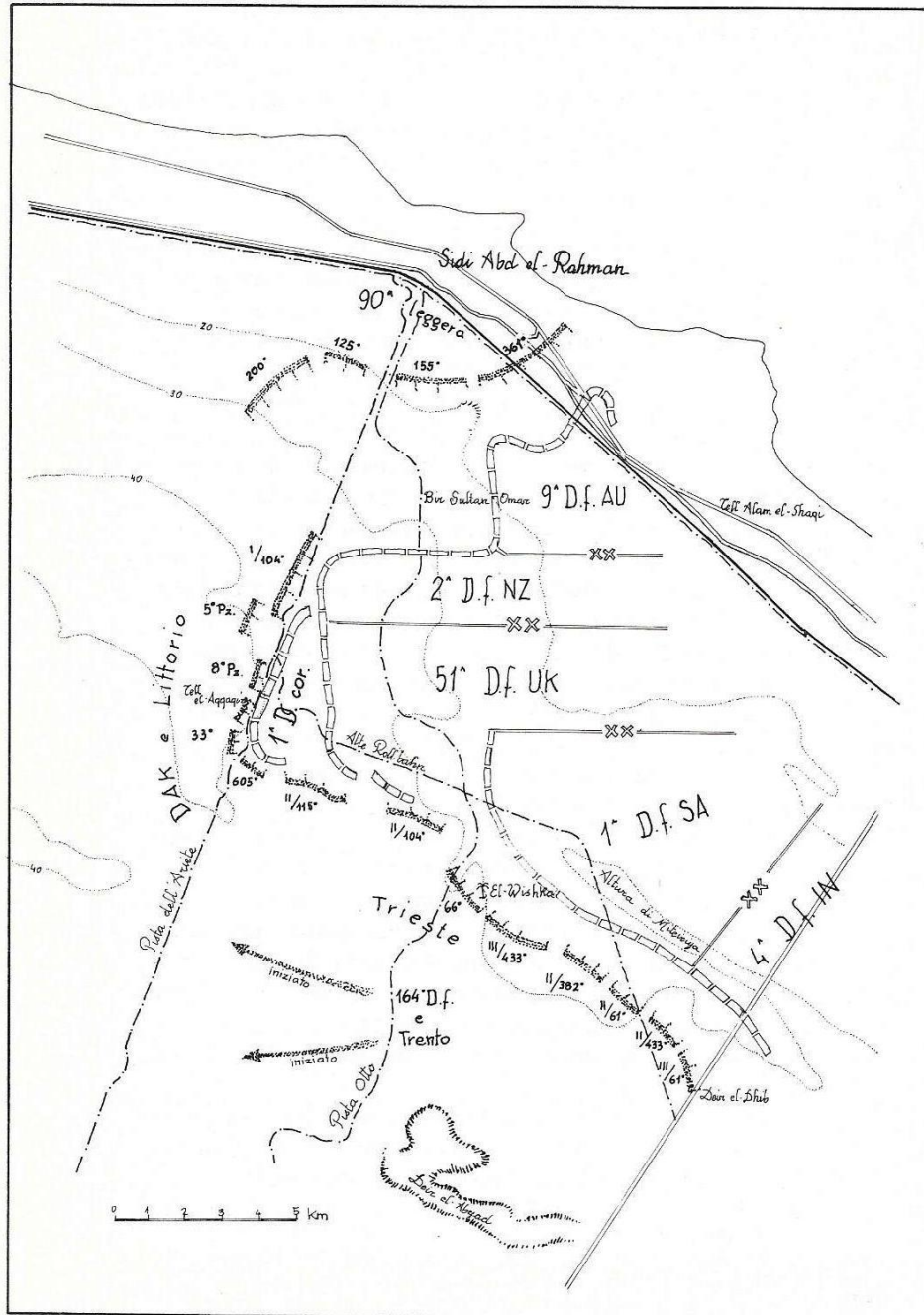
Rommel well imagine the negative effect of the countermand to the units, since "*the last soldier knew that now, while making every effort, the battle could no longer change*"<sup>(82)</sup>, and at 18:40 asked the commanders of the Corps if humanly possible to make a conclusion in favor of the struggle. Probably the goal to be achieved to remain masters of the battlefield -that rejecting victoriously every British attempt to break through to von Thoma -Thus he specified that the order of Hitler "*excludes any type of elastic defense.*"

Mancinelli informed the Comando Supremo of the painful determination of Rommel, but did not attribute it explicitly to the interventions from Berlin and Rome, and even putting a "*for now*" that meant not entirely lost hope that Rommel could save the ACIT:

The situation in the northern sector of 15 November at 3:00

LA SITUAZIONE NEL SETTORE SETTENTRIONALE  
ALLE 15 DEL 3 NOVEMBRE

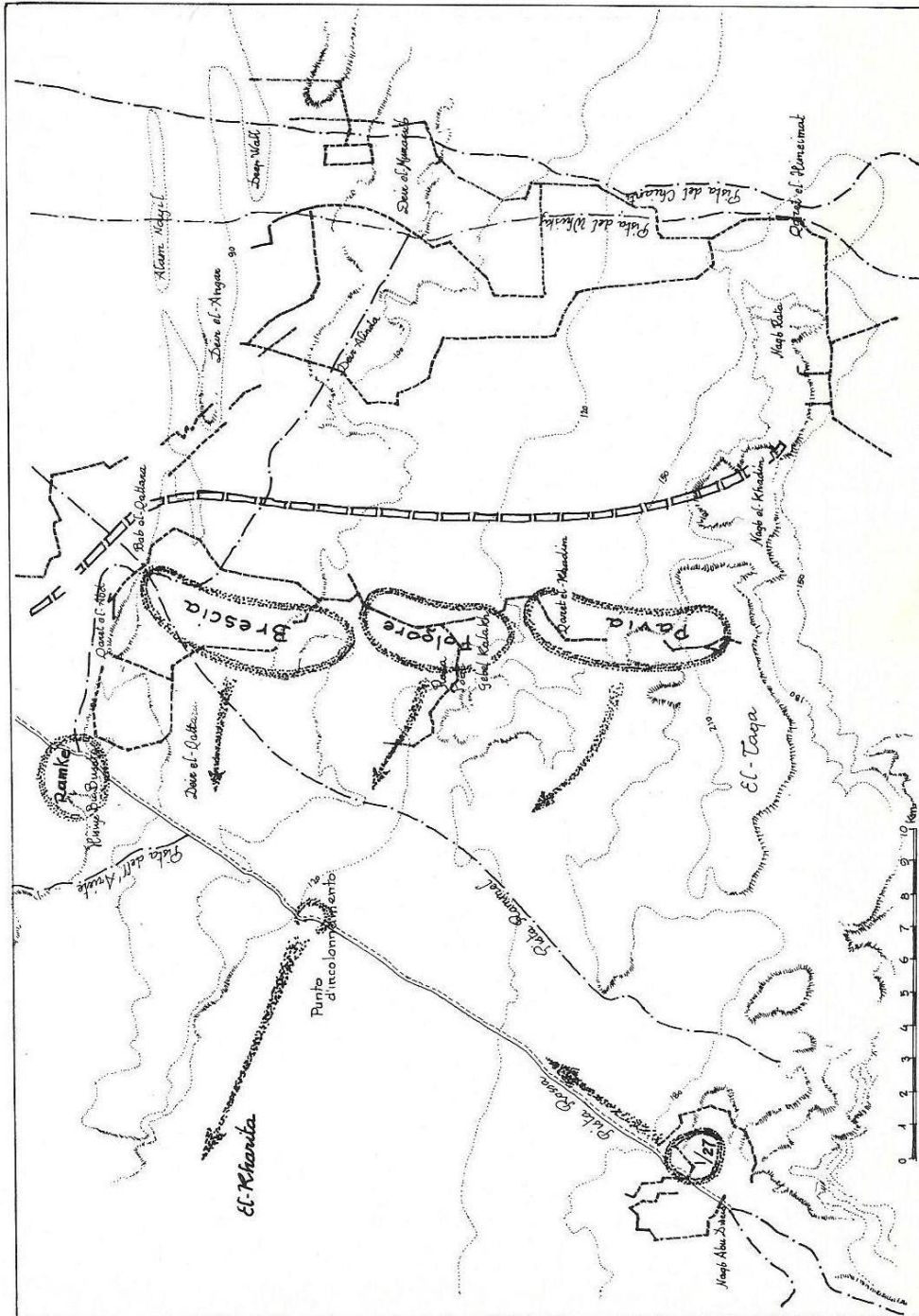
Schizzo n. 96



The situation of the X Corps on the evening of 3 November

LA SITUAZIONE DEL X CORPO D'ARMATA  
LA SERA DEL 3 NOVEMBRE

Schizzo n. 97





“Situation 16:30. Rommel considering the extreme difficulty of making the movement of retreat under the pressure of the enemy richly motorized decided to give up for now to retreat himself and attempt resistance in place. The positions now occupied by the ACIT will play his last card. The only chance of success is entrusted to the possibility of inflicting losses on the enemy so high as to cause him to give up definitively by the offensive (...). From interceptions he is preparing a new attack on the strong front of CTA”.<sup>(83)</sup>

That morning, around 09:30, Montgomery had held the commanders of the army corps. From the field of Tell el Aqqaqir came conflicting reports about the success of the effort of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div., But overall it seemed that the German anti-tank deployment was still efficient, which was far from comforting. It seems that even many generals consider the situation critical and ask themselves until the pressure could cure. It was already eleven days of fierce fighting. Losing the battle was no longer possible, but not being able to win it was far from unlikely. On the other hand, the domain of the *Royal Air Force* appeared undeniable and there were good reasons to believe Rommel every ounce of resources. The day before the decryption of some *Enigma* messages had allowed Montgomery to know that Rommel and *Fliegerfuhrer* had reported an untenable situation. In addition, reports of setbacks began to flow to the Italian-German troops.

The first clues were collected by the Australian 9<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. then with 13<sup>th</sup> Corps to the south, then the aerial reconnaissance confirmed a growing movement to the west coast on the rolling stock and an outflow from the front along the desert tracks. Later additional decryption of *Enigma* clarified that Rommel had ordered the withdrawal of the infantry divisions in the night on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and was determined to begin the real retreat from the day of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, disputing the ground inch by inch. Meanwhile, the *Fliegerfuhrer* was shifting its air units to airports in the rear. To complete the picture of ACIT: the availability of fuel was less than 1.7 units, the movement of artillery ammunition from the depots of El Daba impossible for lack of fuel and the level of stocks at the largest logistics base of Matruh very low.

But that ACIT withdraw was the last thing that Montgomery could want, so at noon was oriented to a final effort and chose the 51<sup>st</sup> *Highlanders* as a spearhead for the final shock.,

The guidelines were intended to circumvent that gave more than to break through the last barrier constituted by the DAK. Overcoming the German anti-tank barrier had to be pursued over running the southern part,

clearly not very deep. The protagonist of this first phase, the 51<sup>st</sup> *Highlanders* had the task of overcoming the track Rahman on wide front, creating the conditions for turning from the south of the DAK. The second phase was for the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div. supplemented the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Arm. Bd: a result obtained by the 51<sup>st</sup>, it had to go in depth until Sidi Ibeid behind the Italian XX and XXI Corp (sketch n. 98).

Obtaining these results, it could begin completing the success. In the evening, informed by new decryption of telegrams in *Enigma* code that Rommel had given up on pulling up stakes, Montgomery gave orders to Lumsden. The 10<sup>th</sup> Corp had been cleared up just for the precise task of the three divisions of the same structure. The 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. of Briggs had the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. and the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. Bd.; the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. of Harding had the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. and the 131<sup>st</sup> Mot. Bd.; the 10<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. of Gatehouse had a the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. and the 133<sup>rd</sup> Mot. Bd. Each division also had a regiment of armored cars, artillery, engineering and services. In addition there were units of armored cars: the *Royal Dragoons*, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> South African regiment. Now, the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. had to go from Tell el Aqqaqir towards the Ghazala station, followed, on the left, by the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div.<sup>(84)</sup>

For their part, Freyberg would be put in a position to continue right on Fuka and Wimberley would have moved to the southwest of Tell el Aqqaqir to replace the New Zealanders.

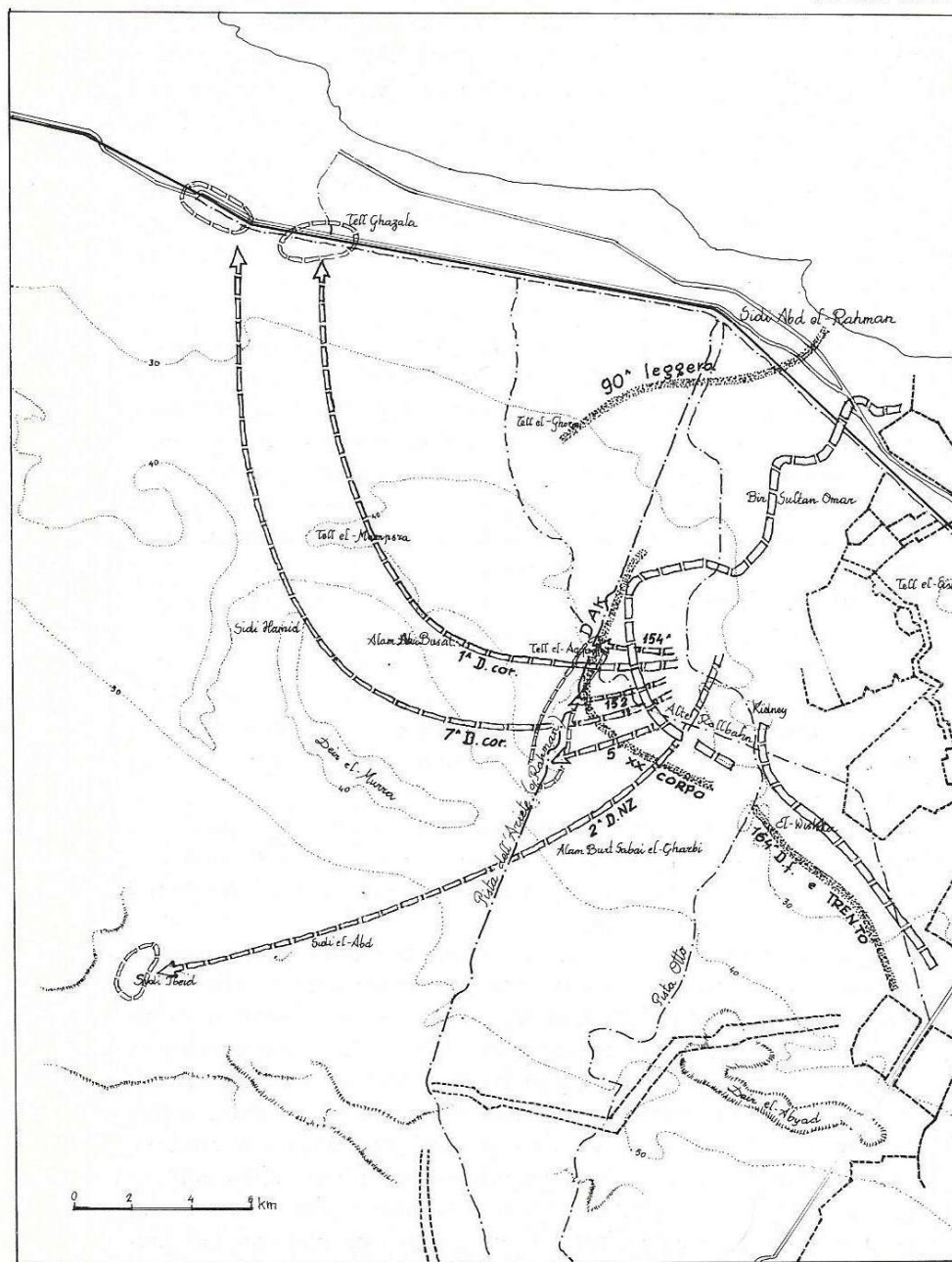
According to the above, Gen. Wimberley was ordered to mount three separate attacks. The first at 17:45 that same afternoon to occupy the track Rahman a few kilometers south of Tell el Aqqaqir with the 152<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd.; the second at 01:30 on November 4, to move the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Bd. immediately south of the 152<sup>nd</sup>, always on the aforementioned track; the third at 06:15 of the 4<sup>th</sup> to attack hill 44 of Tell el Aqqaqir with the 154<sup>th</sup> Inf. Bd.. Meanwhile the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian would have swept the coast abandoned by the enemy.

The attack of the 152<sup>nd</sup> Inf. Bd. had to be preceded by a heavy aerial bombardment and a strong artillery preparation, except that as always a bit confused news and frequent errors topographic led the command of the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. to think of the track already left by the Germans and 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd. now to the west of it. Accordingly Gen. Briggs said the cancellation of the aerial intervention, which, he feared, would have involved his unit. As Wimberley warned Leese that according to his information, the goal was not at all abandoned by the enemy, the result was that the aid of fire was abolished and the 8th *Royal Tanks* advanced with part of the *Gordons*

The orders given by Montgomery in the afternoon of 3 November

GLI ORDINI IMPARTITI DA MONTGOMERY  
NEL POMERIGGIO DEL 3 NOVEMBRE

Schizzo n. 98



with *Valentines*. But the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer was still in place and more field interceptions had warned of the imminence of the attack. Thus, the operation ended in a complete fiasco. The British losses were translated into 94 men, 9 Valentine destroyed and 11 damaged from a total of 32 tanks. When, later, Wimberley received from Leese provisions for cooperation that would ensure the attack of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Bd., he could not but ask for help: "*Do we have to continue to attack in this way?*" <sup>(85)</sup>.

#### 4 NOVEMBER

The night action of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Brigade with the support of the 50<sup>th</sup> *Royal Tanks* seemed at first born under a bad star. First, the brigade had to come from the sector of Miteiriya, which made dubious punctuality and therefore led him to postpone the start of the attack by an hour. Then he had to move on unfamiliar terrain, with no prior reconnaissance and in the darkness of night. On the other hand he has been receiving the support of nine regiments of field artillery and two medium caliber and, although he did not know it, the 15<sup>th</sup> Panzer was withdrawing in the direction of Deir el Murra. The German unit employed was the II/115<sup>th</sup> *Panzergrenadiere*, which lost about 180 men. At 08:00 the 5<sup>th</sup> the Indian was on target (although a battalion, lost, came after 20:00).

The third action had no history. The Germans had left Tell el Aqqaqir, so around 8 o'clock position was occupied practically without opposition.

According to Montgomery employment of six kilometers of track Rahman south of Tell el Aqqaqir was crucial because it allowed him to circumvent the southern side of the German anti-tank positions, directed that no effort had managed to dismantle. And the first setback of DAK then allowed the spread of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp of Lumsden. It was not exactly like that, since on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> the ACIT still remotely controlled the abandoned area of Tell el Aqqaqir. However, it is clear that the hours of ACIT were numbered.

The retreat towards the 85° meridian had caused an inconvenience more or less extensive interruption in the large semicircle described now by DAK, the XX and XXI Corp, and, right in front of the entire central section, a vacuum of a fifteen kilometers between the XXI and the X Corps, being collected in the east of EI Kharita. This freedom of movement were taking advantage

of by widely infiltration of armored cars of the *Royal Dragoons* and South Africans, to cause confusion, disorientation and damage to the rear of the XXI and the X Corps.

At 07:30 Kesselring arrived in Africa. Forced to stay in Crete for equipment trouble, later regret the involuntary delay: "*The result (...) obtained on Nov. 4 would have a much greater influence, perhaps decisive, a day before*" was <sup>(86)</sup>. welcomed *Fliegerfuhrer* Seidemann, who was accompanied immediately by Rommel.

The commander of the ACIT, convinced that Hitler had weighed in the decisions of the judgment unjustifiably optimistic OBS, greeted him in a state of mind at that hostile. He was outraged by an order received to remain close to El Alamein; concerned about the condition of the coastal roadway constantly bombarded by the *Royal Air Force* and here and there blocked by vehicles in flames, although still traffic took place essentially ordered; uncertain outcome of the mission of Leut. Berndt. And the enemy seemed to have fallen asleep on their laurels! "*I never dared to hope – he commented -that the British commander left us such an opportunity. Now it passes without that we take the opportunity!*"<sup>(87)</sup>. Then the meeting with Kesselring began in polemical tone.

Kesselring showed himself at first inclined to support the thesis of Hitler and tried to justify it, explaining it with the experiences on the Russian front, where more than once clinging desperately to a position turned out to be the best solution. Rommel replied:

"I had previously thought that the Fuhrer left me in command of the army. This order foolish produced on us the effect of a bomb. He can not simply apply to the conduct of the war in Africa, his knowledge acquired for the most part with the experience in Russia. Here he should definitely leave the decision to me"<sup>(88)</sup>.

And more or less with this bitter outburst would be exhausted the conversation, according to the memories of Rommel. But in truth the interview went well, and in another way. When he learned that the DAK was left with twenty *Panzer* efficient and knew the situation better, Kesselring reacted immediately and did not hesitate to suggest to "*consider the message of Hitler as an appeal rather than a particular order.*" Such a proposal taken aback by Rommel as he does not know how to respond if the telegram Fuhrer seemed no loopholes. But Kesselring insists convince him to act on the basis of

as it felt right to do under the circumstances, because "*it is not possible that the Fuhrer wants that his army be destroyed here at El Alamein.*" Then, seeing that his party would not have had the fortitude to openly contravene the order received, he formulated another proposal: to turn back OKW, explaining the inability to hold the line because of El Alamein losses incurred and the excessive power of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and claiming that only the use of a strategic retreat would allow him to retain at least part of North Africa. And he added that he himself would have advocated such a solution with his own dispatch to Hitler. This was done.<sup>(89)</sup>

Rommel's message was the following:

"On the last day the enemy, with 400-500 tanks and strong infantry units, opened a breach in the north ten kilometers to a depth of fifteen in the most important battlefield, almost completely destroying the frontline troops.

We continue to do everything possible to remain in possession of the battlefield, but the losses are so high that you can not count on a long continuous front

I am fully convinced of the need to keep to the bitter end positions and not cede any ground. But I believe the British tactics, destroying one after another of our units with the hardest concentrations of persistent fire and air strikes, can only harm us and gradually destroy our forces.

In the current situation I see then in warfare, where the enemy has to fight at every step, the only chance to inflict further losses and to avoid us in the African theater.

Please authorization to do so. If it will be given, I mean the withdraw maneuver and restore, with subsequent changes, the troops of a new, current Fuka toward the south.

On about 70 kilometers from this line, the southern sector, along thirty kilometers, it is not practically penetrable by a large armored formations."<sup>(90)</sup>

After the interview, Rommel reached the command of the DAK in a carousel almost uninterrupted British bombers and fighter-bombers. Upon arriving, he was informed immediately that the front offered a precarious stability, however, the enemy does not seem to have yet advanced the artillery and apparently the effort of the English 10<sup>th</sup> Corp had stopped.

In fact it was the 1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. he was trying to open the road. At dawn, the mist dissipated, Gen. Briggs had set in motion the division with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. heading to the northwest, more precisely in the direction of Tell el Mampsra, where he held the joint *Kampfstaffel*

between the 21<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*. But as the pressure increases, the German line in that stretch held (sketch no. 99).

Conversely, the center things were falling. The situation of the XXI Corp in the morning appeared in already alarming tones. The remains of *Trento* were deployed at Bir el Abd, northwest of the mine field laid out longitudinally on the rear of the position of strength; the *Bologna* was scattered in the desert. At 07:00 the *Trento* signaled to be committed: coming on the road was the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Arm. Bd. followed by New Zealanders. The new message: the enemy attack, initially faced, was taken with the decision and the line was broken. At 13:00 the Command of the Corps received the last radio communication of Gen. Masina "Ammunition low. We will shoot all on site." Those uses the match against the *Trento*, the 2nd New Zealand launched the armored cars and light tanks on the trail of the *Bologna*, surprising units returning on foot to where they started in extreme exhaustion, disorganization and effortlessly capturing them.

As for the XX Corp of De Stefanis, the picture appeared in colors equally dramatic. The *Ariete* Arm. Div. had arrived that morning from Deir el Murra and Bir el Abd, ie between 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and the *Trento*, and, having left behind some units with X Corps, it has available: the XII/8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank of three battalions and one hundred medium tanks and the 132<sup>nd</sup> artillery of four groups of different sizes. Just to the northwest were the remains of the *Trieste*: the 66<sup>th</sup> Inf. with two battalions and 21<sup>st</sup> artillery with three groups, all ranks very low and short of food and ammunition as part of the equipment had been sent with the few vehicles to Fuka. Further west was collected what remained of the *Littorio*: a battalion formation of the 12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri with two companies and a few pieces from 100/17. The tank residues of the 133<sup>rd</sup> Tankers were fighting among those of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*.<sup>(91)</sup>

At about 10:00 De Stefanis led the 7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. with the 22<sup>nd</sup> Arm. Bd. at the head (sketch n. 100). The *Ariete* had made a small anti-tank deployment and were granted in respect of aid of the artillery of the *Trieste*, but proved too unbalanced confrontation. Stopping at 1,500 meters, the *Sherman* began the turkey shoot against the M 13, which had no choice but to resort to the movement to close the gap. The struggle was long and bitter. Turning from the south of the artillery, by a part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Light Arm. Bd., give the *coup de grace*.<sup>(92)</sup>

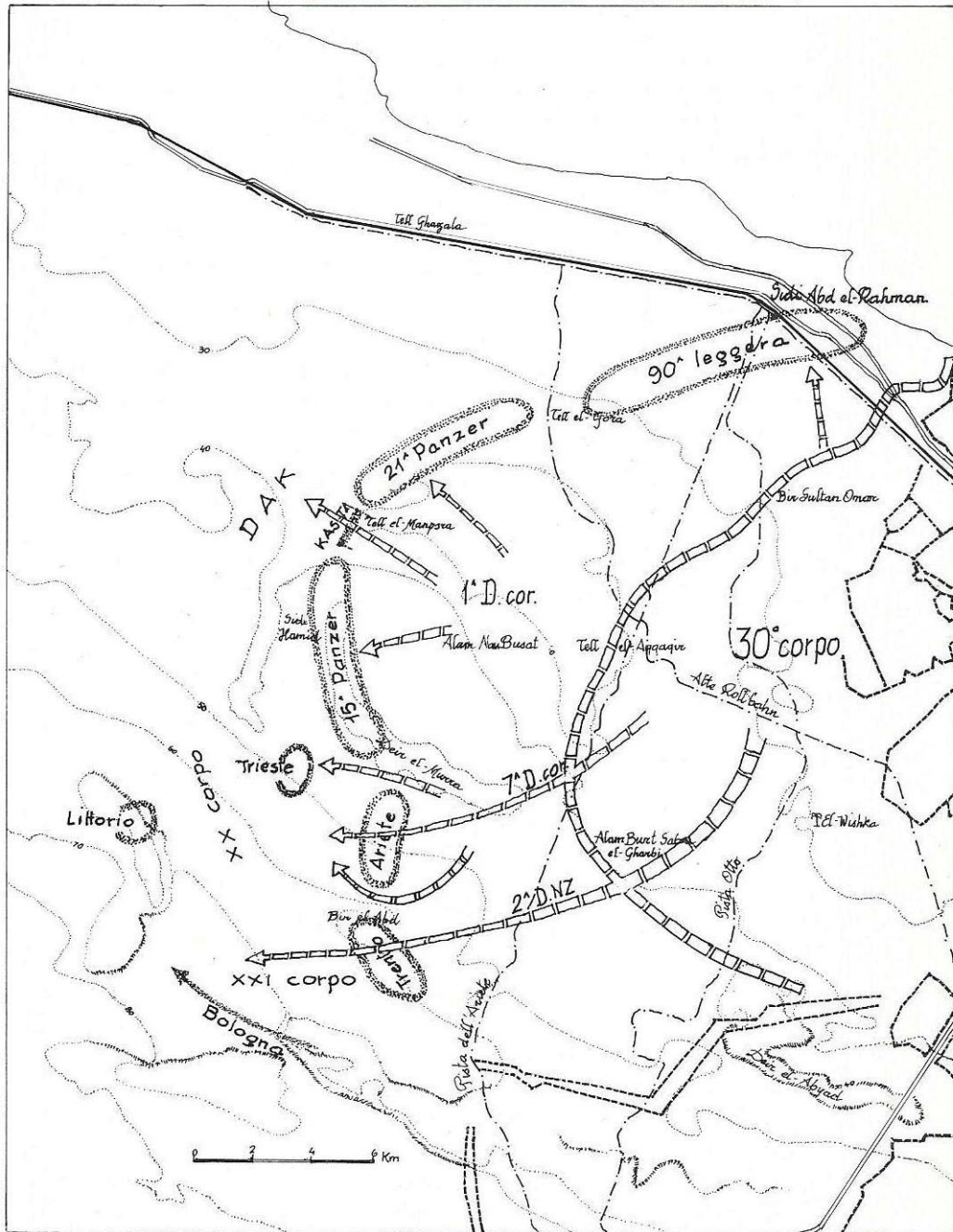
At 13:00 Rommel received more bad news from the Col. Bayerlein, who returned from a tour of reconnaissance: the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* not give up but the hinge was blown with the destruction of the Kampfstaffel. Worse: Gen. von Thoma had fallen into British hands.<sup>(93)</sup> These news



### The fighting on November 4 in the northern sector

## I COMBATTIMENTI DEL 4 NOVEMBRE NEL SETTORE SETTENTRIONALE

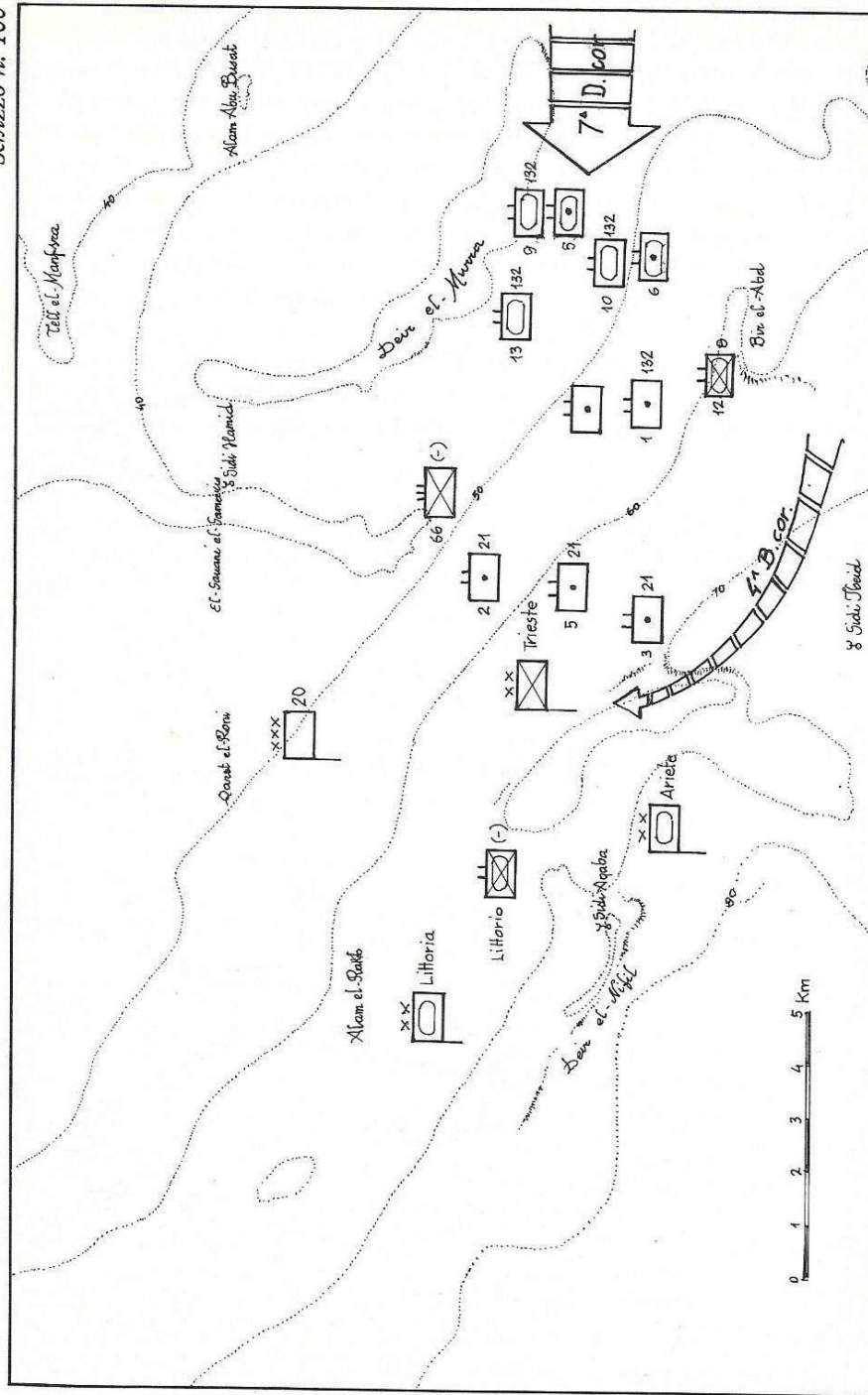
*Schizzo n. 99*





LA FINE DEL XX CORPO D'ARMATA  
(4 novembre)

Schizzo n. 100



translated unfortunately in to the actually fears of Rommel:

"To the southeast and south of the headquarters [of the DAK] - He remembered - you saw large clouds of dust. Here it took place the desperate struggle of the small and poor Italian tanks of XX Corp with about 100 British heavy tanks, which had bypassed the Italians on the exposed right side. As reported later Major von Luck, I sent with his unit to plug the gap between Italians and the DAK, the first, representing now our strongest motorized troops, fought with extraordinary value (...).

One after another, the tanks exploded or catch fire while the violent fire of enemy artillery covered the positions of enemy artillery and Italian infantry. At about 15:30 was sent the last radio message of the *Ariete*: "*Enemy tanks raided south of the Ariete; thereby the Ariete was encircled. It is found about five kilometers north-west Bir el Abd. Tanks of the Ariete fight.*" In the evening the Italian XX Corp, after valiant fight, was annihilated.

With *Ariete* we lost our older Italian comrades, which, admittedly, we had always asked for more than they were able to do with their poor weapons" <sup>(94)</sup>.

In fact *Ariete* was not completely destroyed and the same applies to the *Trieste* and *Littorio*: The division commands managed to disengage the remaining forces <sup>(95)</sup>. However towards 15:00 there was not more to the illusion of the possibility of resistance: the front of DAK seemed broken in several places, the XX and XXI Corps was nearing annihilation and the X left to itself, the mechanized columns of the enemy enjoyed complete freedom of maneuver and the *Royal Air Force* was raging. Now Rommel did not hesitate over and, doing without any authorization, he gave the order of general retreat. It was 15:30. Maybe, he hoped, he would still have had time to save the remaining motorized units of the ACIT. Provided but they managed to move quickly on the road and run away at full speed. Who could not take what was lost.

The approval of Hitler from the OKW start at 20:50 and will arrive at the ACIT the next morning: "*Under the circumstances, approve of his intentions. The Duce gave similar directives by the Comando Supremo.*"

The German divisions soon began to retreat, put in the column on the roadway. The XX Corp, which was to bring with the troops saved 25 kilometers south of Fuka, reorganized to better units and carried out the movement in the night on the 5<sup>th</sup>, on a route parallel to the coast and 20 to 25 kilometers away from it to give security on the side columns out flowing along the way. The haulage, with its escort, instead were started on the road to be, just a destination, checkpoints for the collection of misfits. The XXI Corp

encountered substantial difficulty to retreat the new I/61<sup>st</sup> Inf. and I/39<sup>th</sup> Inf., located, as mentioned previously, the station of Ghazal and to El Daba, but as the troops of the *Bologna* and the 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri there were in high hopes of escaping capture.

Finally, the X Corp. Nebbia was ordered to retreat at 16:00 and by 19:00 had received the implementing regulations to the *Brescia*, *Folgore* and *Pavia*. The move was expected in three night stages, each about 25 km; before the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> must therefore be completed on the line of Fuka. The routes through the desert were two: the northernmost to the *Brescia* and artillery corps; the other for the *Folgore*, the command corps and *Pavia*.

In such a difficult and complex operation, under constant enemy pressure, when everything should have been marked by speed and dynamism, the fearful deficiency vehicles came to exercise a role and influence with aspects of real tragedy about the fate of the troops of the X Corp. Forced to move on foot, hampered by the need to bring with him the heavy weapons of the units and the materials needed to get to the meridian of Fuka, they were intended to be the easiest of prey and a collapse in the desert of hunger, thirst and deadly fatigue.

As mentioned previously, Deleuse had retrieved, at least on paper, 150 vehicles for the transport of the infantry. The cession, which was made very reluctantly by Barbasetti, who probably thought to the problems of the Inland, so much so that he wanted to emphasize Mancinelli as it “*clearly affects the very limited transportation options for us and the Germans*” and indicate, also, that when completed the emergency trucks had to be unloaded of supplies. “*For your orientation - concluded Barbasetti - held that once granted, such vehicles, as always would not be returned*”<sup>(96)</sup>. Unfortunately, in addition to the limited number loaned, was established, obviously to try to shorten the time that the vehicles flowing to El Daba from the morning of 3 November, gradually everyone had hurried up the task of filling the allotment. The General Staff of connection with the ACIT had gather them, divide them into groups and start them by large units. It should be added that the majority of drivers and vehicles were civilians, to the Intendenza linked by a regular contract for certain consignments and certainly not up to the first line; To advance in this case had to more or less blindly into the desert in search of the recipient; that the environment of the immediate rear November 3 was highly disturbed by the continued air raids and harassing the British and the episodes of

British and South African armored cars; that the coast already offered symptoms of withdrawal.

Mancinelli busied himself trying to organize small columns. Estimated to even a hundred trucks actually presented themselves at El Daba and they all went to X Corp, the farther and that in greater anguish, *"I never knew - He wrote later -if any of those precious trucks ever reached its destination; unfortunately I have reason to believe that all have been lost or dispersed"*<sup>(97)</sup>. At 05:00 in the morning, at the end of the first stage of the withdrawal, the X Corp reached Qubûr Shamata, 50 kilometers south of EI Daba, supplies desperately ask: *"Troop without water, vehicles without fuel. Note 150 vehicles not come"* (7:30) and a little later Nebbia announced: *"Tonight I continue the retreat and if not I will have to abandon tractors without fuel and trucks without petrol"* (10:00 hours).

In Rome, the events seemed to be considered with a strange detachment. At 17:45 of that tragic November 4 von Rintelen he went to the Comando Supremo with telegrams sent in the late morning from Rommel and Kesselring. Cavallero argued that a withdrawal was acceptable within certain limits, beyond which *"no longer means to defend itself to the utmost and at the same time leads to loss of the divisions on foot. I point out that if you withdraw the army is lost. The enemy arrived with 150 tanks [?!] Whereas before they were 400. So her effort is decreasing."*<sup>(98)</sup> After that, since Hitler had decided to leave some room for maneuver to Rommel, did complete the following dispatch to the commander of the ACIT:

"Whereas:

- a. yesterday having that the Supreme Command ordered maintain positions of the army;
- b. that in subsequent actions such order could have not have practice the implementation & army front is greatly set back it is disappearing almost entirely benefit positions held;
- c. taken note of the documents that the German general at the Comando Supremo here have order communicated to the OKW;

Duce having recognize utility of leaving leeway to bring the army step by step to the position of Fuka as you proposed, in order to ensure the retreat also of the not motorized units.

Duce order that everything useful to the enemy is systematically destroyed in the place that are left, including the railway, its facilities & tanks that can not be cleared.

Comando Supremo continues utmost effort to intensify even supplies by air. Having already prepared a fighter group influx to the coast while German airplanes reinforcements are on the move. More information will verbally General Gandin, which will come to the coast tomorrow the fifth current"<sup>(99)</sup>.

Cavallero seemed satisfied to show von Rintelen that "*the Comando Supremo with this dispatch has found the form to give to Marshal Rommel directives without having had direct communication from him.*"<sup>(100)</sup> Regardless of the discomfort caused by this attitude, it was no longer time for directives from Rome and from Berlin. At 23:40 von Rintelen telephoned Cavallero referring a new communication from Kesselring:

"Front broke through in the middle. *Ariete* surrounded. Near the DAK in three places in the deep raids. Commanding general DAK prisoner. The armored army try overnight to fall back in the positions of Fuka, where certain conditions are relatively favorable defense (...). Arrived in [Roma] in the early hours of the morning"<sup>(101)</sup>

The evening bulletin of the ACIT was leaden:

"In the morning hours the *Ariete* Armoured Division, the German Africa Corp and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light Division of Africa, including the 164<sup>th</sup> light division of Africa, have rejected several attacks of infantry and strong armored forces. Conversely, in the early afternoon, after renewed action with several heavy tanks, supported by strong artillery fire, the enemy was able to break through the front of the German Africa Corp in three points. The elimination of these slippages, due to the lack of reserves, has not been possible. Simultaneously the *Ariete* Armoured Division has been repeatedly attacked, both the front and the side, by about 100 tanks. Strong contingent of the division, was destroyed or after valiant resistance, fell into enemy hands.

It is not known, until now, the whereabouts of the remains of the armored division *Littorio* and motorized division *Trieste*. Previously the XXI Corps had been broken by strong tank force and, with some of its units, had withdrawn westward. Subsequently air reconnaissance reported that the X Corps, strongly pressed by the enemy, also withdrawing to the west.

Due to the withdraw of the X and XXI Corps, the destruction of the *Ariete* Armoured Division, as well as breakthroughs in the German Africa Corp, the current front can no longer be held. Therefore, also in order to prevent the German Africa Corp and the 90<sup>th</sup> Light division of Africa remain cut off, it had to issue the order of withdraw on the positions of Fuka. For the moment it does not judge if he can establish and maintain there a new front.

General of the armored troops von Thoma, in charge of the command of the German Africa Corp, while trying to prevent with his echelon of fighting, the penetration by enemy forces, would be fallen into enemy hands, after the destruction of his echelon before the most advanced line "<sup>(102)</sup>.

In London, the atmosphere was large and justified euphoria. The order to win or die sent by Hitler to Rommel in the late morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> was described by *Ultra* early on the 4<sup>th</sup>, but for reasons of

security the news was reported only in the afternoon to Alexander and prohibiting disclosure. At 15:30 Gen. Brooke was again summoned by Churchill, that the deep satisfaction he wanted to ring the bells. Hardly the head of G.S.G .I. He managed to convince him to wait a little longer, to avoid painful misunderstandings. Finally, in the late afternoon a telegram arrived from Alexander:

"After ten days of bitter and violent fighting the 8<sup>th</sup> Army inflicted a severe defeat to the German and Italian troops under the command of Rommel. The enemy front was broken and the British armored formations increased in strength and are now working behind the enemy. Disengage enemies units that remain are in full retreat and are attacked incessantly by our armored and motorized units and by aviation. Other enemy divisions are still deployed and try to escape annihilation; it is likely that they will be surrounded and isolated.

The RAF has lent support to a great land battle throughout his life and is now hammering relentlessly retreating columns. The fighting continues “<sup>(103)</sup>.

Churchill replied enthusiastically that if indeed it were a decisive victory, "*I intend to ring the bells in all of England, for the first time during this war*"; But it would take him at least 20,000 prisoners.

#### 4. CONSIDERATIONS

The fierce battle fought from 23 October to 4 November at El Alamein has gone down in history as one of the decisive battles. According to the clamor of the moment and considered the practical result that he obtained in the tactical and strategic field, certainly has all the qualifications to be called such. However ... if you just look up the cited period and place themselves in the right frame the events of late June-early July and late August-early September of that same land not, and those that were outlined in the immediate future to the French North Africa, it must agree not wrong place, two questions already places at the time by critics and scholars: between the three battles of El Alamein, the third is really to deserve the role of the most important? It was really necessary this last battle?

For now let's just some consideration about the fact of arms itself, subject to seek an answer to the questions during the consultations.

The setting of the battle. "*The army has stopped the offensive -He had informed Rommel in his famous report of 22 September -and took defensive positions favorable for an attack on the future (...). I trust that (...) we can strengthen the army (...). In the meantime, we'll keep on the defensive (...).*" The basic criteria for the organization of the defense have been illustrated by the field marshal.

Air and armored superiority enjoyed by the opponent and the chronic shortage of fuel of the ACIT did not allow a defense other than static. So it was necessary to support the infantry in a fortified front.

The position of El Alamein had their backs against the sea and the impassable El Qattara Depression and did not show an excessive extent. Then you could and should play on it the map of the defense to the bitter end.

The land offered no natural handholds to enjoy in good measure. So it was necessary to cover the entire line with deep minefields, using even those taken from the enemy, and increase their value an impediment with explosive devices, aircraft bombs, artillery shells and wire.

The enemy was especially cut for a battle breaking because his training was affected by the experience gained from the fighting of the First World War. So the static structures had to be so solid and so densely manned front to withstand a long time against very strong attacks.

The enemy superiority in men and equipment appeared formidable. So it was necessary to build a security zone very deep, so as to cause a marked attrition in British brigades in the first row.

In such an environment the lines of attack were easily scalable in terms of likelihood and dangers and for sure the enemy would have launched multiple attacks. So the whole front had to be defended to a similar extent. But the Italian units had shriveled organic structure and "miserable" armament and moreover there were obviously worn (the entire XXI Corp had only 12,000 men, including services). So the purpose of a better use of German weapons, especially anti-tank, agreed to alternate the position of strength Italian battalions and German battalions.

Artillery of the ACIT was in serious state of inferiority. Not only stocks of ammunition were limited, especially for some gauges and the guns of war booty, but most of the pieces were Italians, ie generally outdated and with a range

useful of just 6 to 9 kilometers to the gauges 75 and 100, and ten for the 105 against the twelve kilometers of the English 25 pounders. So to be given to the divisional artillery, including those of *Panzerdivisionen*, an array behind the strong points, pushing some batteries into the area of security.

The British mass armor was unstoppable in the open field. The slowdown and the confusion caused by minefields; the shooting of 88 pieces; resistance to the bitter end of the structures that were, this would not have been able to prevent infiltration. And the enemy would have immediately tried to expand quickly to any breach, so as to achieve the desired outcome beyond the point of resistance. So it was necessary to deploy armored divisions near that position of strength, to allow them the elimination of local penetrations with immediate counterattacks.

The technical inadequacy of the Italian tanks (14 tons. And a gun of 47) placed them painfully at the mercy of the *Crusader* (20 tons. And a gun from 57) and especially of *Grant* and *Sherman* (about 30 tons. And a gun of 75 ). Then he agreed intermingling also of Italian and German tank battalions, constituting, at least as initial territorial distribution, mixed groupings.

These essentially, the criteria which Rommel abided, but he first knew exactly be a compromise solution. Apart from the fact that not supposed nowhere near the size and quality of the real British superiority, the excessive imbalance in the ratio of air forces, which imposed severe limitations in field tactical, logistic and tethers, which forced him to live more or less to the day, without much room for the unexpected, showed him clearly the dubious compliance of a plan in which the accounts had been made to better return. He recognized him:

"A compromise can not be an ideal solution. We just did what we could, with our very scarce resources, to deal with the unavoidable deficiencies that tormented us."<sup>(104)</sup>

Rommel wrote this. However, in the report of 22 September he had said to the commanders of major units: "*The deployment, which will be adjusted within a few weeks, it will give way for not fear even a massive attack.*" Perhaps the optimism shown was of circumstance or was based on hoped for substantial reinforcements. However it is also possible that "*pendular in the progress of his feelings at that time fell the beat of optimism*" as noted Mancinelli. However we must not forget that Stumme, responding on Oct. 3



the congratulations of Cavallero to the task, fully shared the thought of Rommel on the army and showed itself an absolute optimism about the expected British attack, given the existence of the prerequisites for effective support to a frontal impact. Indeed it thought possible the transition from defensive to a victorious reaction counteroffensive up to Alexandria, notwithstanding the absolute need for supplies, complements and reinforcements.

Measures decided and ordered by Rommel and accepted and executed by Stumme were appropriate? Rommel was also expressed in the following:

"All of our efforts, the evidence shows, nothing served against the immense superiority of British forces, not because we made mistakes but because the victory was simply impossible under the conditions in which we faced the battle."<sup>(108)</sup>

The deployment of the ACIT have been leveled two basic criticisms. The first concerns the deployment of mass artillery too close to the main points of the position of strength, which is why the groups were to be involved in the negative situation in which the power of the attack put these cornerstones. Now, there is no denying that a deployment would rear most very limited losses due to the action of the British batteries, but not those caused thereby by the air situation. And, anyway, given the limitation of range, only moving forward the artillery could offer a satisfactory return, if not counter-battery at least interdiction and nearby barrier during the approach and the attack of the enemy infantry.

The second fact concerns the orientation of use of reserves: local counterattacks wherever there had been a leak, with waiver of more comprehensive interventions. The observation is convincing but, as in the case of the artillery, does not appear to take account of reality. The corps had no reserves and the ACIT lacked armored forces so conspicuous as to allow two types of stocks, sectors and army. It is therefore understandable that Rommel has felt compelled to choose the surgery to prevent the consolidation of potential bridgeheads over the opposing position of strength: if he left open the stream flow into British armored, would have been overwhelmed. However studies and maneuvers with the paintings were carried out in October by theme prearranged and coordinated intervention of any two divisions -the *Littorio* and 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* to the north, the *Ariete* and the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* to the south after breaking the front, then regarding counterattacks scale anything but reduced.

Also on October 19 Bitossi and von Vaerst were ordered to prepare a brief study of preventive counter to the east of the defensive position. Stumme evidently thought that in the case of British offensive would not have been difficult to identify the enemy columns and surprised they were moving into no man's land. Bitossi bequeathed his study to the Command of the XX Corp a few days later, meaning that it did not meet the utility nor the feasibility of such an action in front of the lines for a variety of reasons, and instead proposing moving tanks and services a ten kilometers further west, in order to have more space for a massive counterattack.

The Fuller made a few remarks on setting the defensive battle by the German-Italian. Determining the strength in place, Rommel would have to resort to the tactic of 1918 with some adjustments: the imminence of the attack, move back the bulk of the army, in practice the DAK and the XX Corp, from 30 to 150 km (sic) - and not of 3-15 kilometers, as in World War I, because penetration of tanks is ten times faster than an infantry attack-and then fight back with violence. Since the 8 Army took twelve days to break through the minefields, Rommel had as many days to fall back: he could do it with everything convenient. Then he added,:

"If he was not able to maneuver in front or on the wings of the defensive position, the only thing that remained for him to take was to prepare to operate on the reverse side; the chosen direction had no great importance, however, because he would face in their favor the battle of movement" <sup>(106)</sup>,

As the famous English critic has been extremely cutting in his final judgment: "*I maintain, then, that the defensive tactics of Rommel was a big mistake,*" no lack of objection to his opinion. Meanwhile, he was writing just after the events, did not know the absence of Rommel nor the sensitive of the ACIT deficiencies; on the other hand the same Rommel claimed to have done what he could, not what he wanted.

Ultimately, keeping in mind the operating climate, information on the enemy in possession of the ACIT and reinforcements on which was more than legitimate to nourish hopes, and given the proximity of the so desired objective the Canal, frankly do not seem substantially different measures identified those adopted. The same appeal to intermingled units of the axis, devised after the crisis of July and openly acknowledged as a temporary expedient, however unpleasant, could appear acceptable on paper.

For Montgomery it was to identify the most cost-effective tactic. The characteristics of the natural suggested more or less equally an attack in the north and south. In fact, already in September Montgomery he had toyed with the idea of exploiting both directions, with a gravitation of the effort in the northern sector. Purpose to be achieved: to create a corridor in the defensive position of the ACIT and pass the 10<sup>th</sup> Coerp to get rid of the *Panzer*. Well done the math, he became convinced that it is not in a position to launch a double shock, or rather could not guarantee a consistency that the southern attack provoke the intervention of half Italian-German armored reserves in that area. So the effort was to have the secondary not binding, but essentially of threat, and at the same time had to be exploited to the extreme consequences if he had not met tenacious resistance. A concept rather complex where assay of the forces.

The military thinking of the time indicated in the destruction of enemy armored divisions the main objective of the battle. The infantry would fall in the second half without effort or even by itself. Because you had to believe that Rommel also share that approach, "*I decided to overthrow the concept and to first destroy the unarmored formations - Montgomery has said -In doing so I would have kept at a distance the armored divisions that would be addressed later*" <sup>(107)</sup>. So it was necessary first to aim at the methodical destruction of the infantry on the point of resistance (which is particularly suited to the training of British troops), while taking the Axis armored unable to prevent the "*demolition*" of static structures, then one would have to consider the *Panzerdivistonen*.

The opponent was known for its unique ability to react. So on the one hand it was necessary to maintain pressure throughout a well-supported and other keep fit to take advantage of every weakness and every circumstance in favor of the north and south.

The main effort would be launched in the northern sector, which seemed to offer a better chance of definitive results. So it was necessary to implement a meticulous plan of deception, which induce an opponent to fear the biggest blow to the south. "*The essential elements of the battle - pointed out Montgomery - would have been: preservation initiative, maintaining the pressure on the enemy, and the balance of forces, so that it was not necessary to react to enemy pushes.*" <sup>(108)</sup>

Montgomery also represent the attempt to find something

new, *who became divorced from the traditional tactic of the desert*, that is, by the winding outside of the south wing. But this could not work outside, because the depression of El Qattara prevented it. He had to break through. He could do it or not having problems of men, neither artillery nor tanks nor airplanes, nor transport, nor ammunition nor fuel. Perhaps there was only limited time. But it was a limit of prestige. He knew operation *Torch* was imminent.

Far from moving remarks to a plan of attack so systematic and *old style*: in war you do what you find most useful for achieving success. Far from wrinkling one's nose almost complete knowledge of the Rommel's cards: War in the advantage gained in the field of information is often the primary mortgage on the victory. Far from criticizing the excessive superiority of forces and means: the war, the greater the supremacy and the lower the losses and quicker victory, at least usually. If ever it seems reasonable, more than a recognition of the genius of the plan, a vague historical approach. Montgomery actually set out to crush Rommel *selon les règles de la mécanique et les lois de la gravitation\**: the concept of the war of the Allies against Napoleon in 1815.

The conduct of the battle. "*Who knows the vital importance of the first measures at the beginning of a defensive battle - Kesselring rightly Commented -can judge what damage the lack of the commander in chief has caused the entire course of the operation*"<sup>(109)</sup>. When we speak of dispositions taken by Rommel we should not forget two things. First of all he did not think the storm would break precisely during his absence; secondly, he felt able to successfully modify the initial plan, where, during the battle, he was aware of the excessive difficulty coping with or overcoming a particular obstacle or the opportunity to exploit an enemy error.

Known the disappearance of Stumme, feared the worst and the first information received by von Rintelen in Rome confirmed the sad situation. Regained the lead, he had a criticism perhaps unfair to his deputy, who would not allow a timely artillery counter preparation to save ammunition. Such an order does not appear from any document. Quite simply, and for some time, Stumme had prescribed a careful discipline of fire, given the known low stock levels within the army, which is very different <sup>(110)</sup>. Much more plausible, however, as the causes of insufficient

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\*French: according to the rules of mechanics and the laws of gravity

counter preparation are the almost immediate interruption of the connections, the difficulty of orientation before an opponent opened fire on the entire face, notes about the counter battery technical limitations, the almost equally little chance of effective close interdiction, secure the difficulties encountered by officers forward observers and perhaps also the imprecision of requests for fire. They were calculated 426 field pieces and 489 heavy field of Leese against 232 field and 64 heavy field and heavy of the Axis with this comment:

"Only 80 of these [Axis pieces] could be reached by the medium artillery that concentrate a volume of 96 rounds per piece in two minutes, on each enemy battery in turn and, before the time zero, were fired about 1,800 shots. The reaction enemy was weak and, according to the British gunners, the volume of fire became considerable only around four in the morning. Some infantry units do not agree with this version "!!!.

In other words, only 24 heavy pieces of the ACIT would be able to hit from the start the batteries of 30<sup>th</sup> Corp, which is why they felt a “*considerable*” reaction only after moving forward the field.

To the south, where the intensity of the offense loomed less massive, the lines of attack were identified more quickly and whether the investment of the defensive position were much more restricted, the entry in the field artillery of the X Corp turned faster. In this regard Gen. Arena said that the fire plan of the *Ariete* and the X Corps provided for the various groups and any normal actions, according to Italian doctrine. In this way it was easy to bring this case on each section of the front of the fire groups able to intervene. "*Despite long and repeated discussions with the German gunners - Arena wrote in his report-not it was possible to have that concept, for us elementary, was practically implemented by the artillery of the 21<sup>st</sup> Panzer, which acted broken down by sectors and were considered as inalienable of the sector endowment* “

It was mentioned to the confidence of Rommel to face events with decisions taken in the moment. Westphal made aware of the trend of the battle, immediately brought to his attention on the area of Kidney and the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> wanted to attend the counterattack launched by units of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* and the *Littorio*. What he found alarmed him; the action progressed with difficulty, while the British infantry defended desperately and kept possession of the positions; Italian-German artillery intervention intended to prevent the influx of reinforcements was unsatisfactory

for lack of ammunition, while the English battery fire was still intense; one Axis *Stuka* raid, in the late afternoon, ended in a disastrous confrontation with fighters and enemy air defenses, while the formations of bombers of the *Royal Air Force* took turns on troops of the ACIT.

Certainly Rommel realized that he could not wait every move the opponent to replicate. He would be embroiled in a series of serious parries unable to conquer the initiative: a suicide. When he learned that the 15th *Panzer* had lost sixty tanks and the *Littorio* almost equally, perhaps he felt unable to resist a concern of Montgomery to wear him down with successive local provocations.

Look, one, the offensive brought him a ray of hope: the enemy, "*unduly hesitant, operated with the utmost caution.*" This would enable them to collect a large armored mass to the north, move back a few kilometers to create space and then destroy the British penetration by force and the skill with which the *Panzerdivisionen* were able, taking advantage of the limitations that armored combat required of the RAF and British artillery. Except that call to the north armored units from the southern sector could be very dangerous and, moreover, use all four armored divisions in a great battle was impossible due to lack of fuel. More than resorting to the usual compromise could not be. And then the 90<sup>th</sup> Light was thrown immediately into the fray, the *Trieste* was brought near and the 21<sup>st</sup> *Panzer* with a grouping of *Ariete* brought to the north. It is too difficult to judge on this point at the rear. Rommel did not feel safe for the proper supply for a engagement of similar proportions, and besides, now there were no doubts about the opponent's of trying to attrition the ACIT. So it does not seem fair to criticize for not having resolved to play all out on the third day of battle. Also because he was maturing in a decision far more serious.

October 29 was a day for some dramatic ways. If Montgomery was struggling with protests in London and the doubts that were circulating around, Rommel was just in front of the worst choices. I saw how things were going, sooner or later the army would know broken through the front. Remain to wait passively for that moment would have been madness. On the other hand, in those conditions was a retreat all uncertainty. He had to buy a little breathing room, break contact, to fall the infantry back in vehicles, protect the retreat with armored divisions, finally recover these.

Each of these stages was a problem and for every problem there was a question: going to make it?

From this moment, or rather the afternoon of the 30<sup>th</sup>, after the reconnaissance done personally upon the position of Fuka, Rommel waited for the opportunity to order disengagement. Let us briefly recall time later:

*October 30*: telegrammed Mancinelli in Rome with the "hypothesis" of the retreat of Fuka (morning);

*November 2*: start *Supercharge* (about 01:00);  
guidance orders to retreat not expected before the 5<sup>th</sup> (late morning);  
notice for uncoupling (16:00);

order to break contact and retreat to the 85° Meridian (19:30);  
ACIT evening bulletin (22:30);

*Nov. 3*: incoming orders of Hitler and Mussolini (13:00);  
countermand to divisions (15:00);

*November 4*: Talk-Rommel Kesselring (08:30);  
new authorization for the retreat by OKW;

British breakthrough Tell el Aqqaqir;  
Decision to retreat of Rommel (15:30);

*November 5*: arrival authorization Hitler and Mussolini (morning).

Rommel knew one mistake: that of not having eluded twenty-four hours before the imposition of Hitler to remain in place to win or die, because then he would be able to save a large part of the army, including infantry. It may seem a shade, but we believe: that in fact the error was committed to sending the evening newsletter of November 2: the same staff reports had to be accomplished with the firm and convinced way to proceed with the retreat even if, more than likely, a refusal by Hitler. Instead Rommel first hoped to prove convincingly and then did not feel hard to ignore the reverse order. After all knew well as the commanders were treated in such a case. The story of Gen. Hoepner, demoted and expelled with disgrace from the army, taught.

One could quibble about the best time to break the contact, but would be an unnecessary theoretical exercise. Whatever judgment you want to express, you have to place it only to cards held by Rommel in those days. And in any such question, which essentially emerges the character of the commander in chief, it is also right to recognize that Rommel was about two years ago underwent a exceptional nervous tension and that he, wrongly or rightly, felt in front a much stronger opponent. *"He was in serious condition*

*nerve, as well as physical* - Gen. von Thoma remembered - *and therefore subject to continuous changes in mood and opinion* " <sup>(112)</sup>.

That said, one can not but emphasize the immediate and resolute stance of Kesselring, once aware of the exact operating situation. Attitude all the more remarkable in that he had presented to advocate resistance to the bitter end. True it is that it is one thing to give an opinion to the next and another is to decide in the first person; But Kesselring showed even after independence of thought respectable.

Now on to the part played by the Comando Supremo. He hates to admit it, but it seems very commendable. That is trying to perform miracles is beyond discussion, but no concrete measures had improved the conditions of the A CIT up to give it a structure appropriate to the circumstances. The picture that emerges from the reports of the commanders of large units is painful and humiliating together. The vaunted "empowerment" had shown euphemism. It enhances an already efficient to enable it to achieve a certain result; the Italian divisions instead were worn, below organic level and inefficient for lack of everything. Just to exemplify, the rifle companies of the *Pavia* had 70-80 men, 27<sup>th</sup> infantry had *seven* trucks and 28<sup>th</sup> *four*. Despite the huge efforts it must be acknowledged that not one of the difficulties distressing divisions at the front was resolved: not that of the cadre, not that of the staff in general, not that of the connections, the motorization, the logistics autonomy, supplies and evictions.

From his diary we obtain that Cavallero had welcomed with great serenity and confidence of the announcement of the offensive Montgomery, although he knew even without the Commander of X and XXI Corps, and had not broken down by the unexpected death of Stumme at the very beginning of the battle. However, the information from Egypt were quick to realize that the threat was far more formidable than probably had thought initially. Appears so inexplicable rejection of the invitation to Rommel to a meeting "*consider the serious situation.*" Barbasetti, whose command was located at Ain el Gazala, that is about 600 kilometers from the front, could neither decide a course of action will bring decisive aid. It was explicit desire, or rather the need to Rommel of an interlocutor in level that could possibly support him in certain proposals in front of the OKW. To hear and report enough Mancinelli, was living the situation.

However, what is perhaps most puzzling attitude



Cavallero during the crisis. On November 2, the news of fierce fighting of tanks in the Tell el Aqqaqir and despite the first revealed concerns by Kesselring, he expressed full confidence. 3 am. in morning, received the night bulletin of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and apparently unwilling to leave the direction of the battle to Rommel, he announced that Mussolini considered it "*necessary to maintain at all costs the current front*" view that there is no rearward cross-border positions better. Most likely he believed that the credibility of the dispatch of the ACIT was vitiated by an hour of pessimism of the commander in chief.

In fact, on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup>, at 09:30, he said by telephone to Mussolini:

"(...) Yes, Duce, it seems to us that an attack is ready. The forces of the enemy according to the findings are greater, but also worn. Our *Ariete* must be in very good condition as to tanks, as Rommel not say it. They arrived 20 tanks and *semoventi*. On telegrams Rommel can not do much ever assignment, because they are marked by the thesis that should present (...). The fuel crisis is overcome, so that not to congest the port [of Benghazi], after the *Portofino* do not send another before the 12<sup>th</sup>".<sup>(113)</sup>

Whatever one's opinion of Cavallero of Rommel, the fact is that from the moment he had ordered the resistance in place - albeit with a strange formula "*The Duce believes ...*" - a basic sense of consistency and prestige had get him to assert the full right of only the Comando Supremo to issue an order or to modify it. Instead, about a conversation with von Rintelen at 13:10 of the 4<sup>th</sup>, we read in the journal: "*I affirm that he [Rommel] can have some freedom of maneuver, but always under the directives of the Fuhrer*", which directives, among other things, did not afford alternatives. A few hours later (17:45), in the course of a new conversation with von Rintelen about "*the Fuhrer's decision to leave some leeway to Marshal Rommel*" namely to allow the withdraw on the line of Fuka, Cavallero said that "*this can be done only within certain limits and that a strong setback does not mean longer defend themselves to the utmost and at the same time leads to loss of the divisions on foot.*" What he meant by "*within limits*" it is not absolutely clear, on the other hand the diary page translates the whole thought of Cavallero as follows: if the army folds to Fuka or elsewhere is doomed because it would immediately lose the infantry divisions and shortly after those the armored; So who better to hang in El Alamein because it is very likely that the enemy will throw in the towel as soon as possible ("*his effort is decreasing*"!). It was an opinion,

who moreover had the consolation of Hitler in the same opinion. Well, it was right or wrong, because they do not insist on it, and therefore the order given? Because instead telegraph to Rommel that "*Duce having recognized usefulness allow freedom of maneuver to bring step by step the Army to the position of Fuka*"? The reason was obvious and sad. Regardless of any determination of the Comando Supremo, Hitler had *decided* to accept the further desperate cry of Rommel. But who was in charge?

We see the position of the main characters faced with the dilemma of leaving or not the ACIT from El Alamein, of course considering the eventuality that it was crushed and then disappeared from the theater of operations in Africa.

Hitler departing was perfectly willing to accept the end of the ACIT. It was part of his way of seeing and will force the army of Paulus at Stalingrad; for the rest, Africa mattered little: after all he had sent the DAK only to help Italy.

Kesselring had a broad view of the war in the Mediterranean and, once placed in front of new or unknown aspects of the operational problem, he did not hesitate to change his mind and eventually to recognize its own misjudgment. He was fully aware of the sum of the ACIT: the battle of El Alamein could lose, the army no.

Rommel passionately lived the drama of his troops. Tangible sign of the inability to hold a long position, whose stability in a certain way and in certain conditions had become guarantor, an initiative against the opponent-powerful and unconstrained power, it could only define the maximum duration of static defense to avoid annihilation. Forced to fight to the bitter end, he would lose the army but not through his own fault, and imprisonment or death would have ended every next discourse. Albeit *in extremis* rebelled. Even a defeat for him was preferable to the total elimination of the army.

Cavallero considered the events under very particular perspective. More relevant to that request Barbasetti about the directives issued by the Comando Supremo, at first had answered briskly with a "*the Battle is led by Marshal Rommel*," then was better explained, stating that any withdrawal could only be conducted by the commander-in chief of the ACIT. However, he focused on the idea of resistance on the spot and the optimism with which assessed the ability to overcome the ordeal seems the defense has done

lose sight of the possibility of a disastrous defeat. In other words, it does not appear to be asked: assuming the ACIT destroyed at El Alamein, with what will stop the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army in Libya? The units of Barbasetti not enough even to stop the advance guard of Montgomery, and those of Bastico already encountered difficulty coping with the hypothesis of Tunisia. Ultimately, while every problem and responsibility of Rommel would end in the sands of El Alamein, Cavallero would be in a tragic situation, with unimaginable consequences. On receipt of the report of Barbasetti of 30 October and in the light of this potential problem, why not learn how to deal with Rommel? Certainly the retreat, in any circumstance implemented, would have involved the sacrifice all or part of the infantry, but save something is always better than losing everything.

In the dilemma of painful implications, probably the way out appears more natural and convenient indicated by Gen. Scattaglia, commander of *Pavia* in his report:

"Motorization and withdraw the most important forces, leaving the other in place with responsibility for defense to the bitter end. The first, more fortunate, they would continue the glorious traditions of their respective units; the other would be sacrificed without regret, doing pay dearly for their sacrifice to the enemy if he attacked. "

And Scattaglia knew that one of the divisions which would have been given the honor of the bloody fall of the positions would be his.

Montgomery has always maintained that the battle took place exactly as planned, which can be considered true when referring to the absolute respect of the criterion of entrusting nothing to chance and to shy away, then, from any improvisation, although suggested by favorable opportunities and unforeseen circumstances . Outside this meaning, the claim is not convincing at all. The commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army omitted some notes: the mediocre results of *Lightfoot* in the attack of the 30<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Corps; the holding of local actions to the detriment of the concentration of all power in a sudden decisive; excessive caution and poor harmonization of efforts, especially in the final stage.

It is seen as the offensive has faltered after just a few days, despite the havoc produced in the northern Italian-German sector. According to Montgomery, this depended on the lack of determination of some commanders of armored units, but there is no denying a certain validity to the opinion of Lumsden and Freyberg: the infantry of the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp had completed its task and

premature release of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp in the fight led to a chaotic crowding into a space in itself cramped and cluttered with more passive obstacles. Undoubtedly the planned close cooperation desk study did not happen and instead two corps, one of one infantry and one of only tanks, they found themselves fighting separately on the same grounds.

At that difficult time, Leese recognized the weight of the resolve of Montgomery and ... spread it:

"He was always calm: nothing bothered him. It could not ever think that someone else could win. If things went bad for us, we always had new supplies to assist the flow: we were always in equilibrium" <sup>(114)</sup>.

As for the local attacks of a division at a time, it is true that led to some leakage, but it is fair to acknowledge that also led to results very convincing. They each put on alert Rommel, forcing him to move units, to accept heavy fighting. In a word, he wore the ACIT.

Considering the systematic nature of the offensive program, all new compared to previous operations in the desert, appears well placed another comment Leese: "*We always had the feeling of having no time to lose. I never went into battle if we did not have everything.*" Yet, despite its strength, the British steamroller did not come to break the remains of DAK and *Littorio* at Tell el Aqqaqir. Probably the break recorded on day 4 was achieved earlier if a armored mass had been hurled towards Deir el Murra. According to one critic certainly not benevolent, the continuous reshuffling of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps, the *corps de chasse* of Lumsden, which was the flagship of Montgomery, and the organic disorder which occurred on November 2 in the 30<sup>th</sup> and in the 10<sup>th</sup> Corp are "*the true test of how the battle had gone the other way, as had failed completely the main plan and how lucky he was to have Montgomery immense resources so as to allow him to escape the same fate of Cunningham and Ritchie*" <sup>(115)</sup>.

Even in the final stage, ie on days 3 and 4, when the ACIT was exhausted and reduced to a few dozen tanks efficient, even then Montgomery did not differ from his attitude of absolute disregard for bold action.

On November 3, in the central sector of the front there was now emptiness. What remained of *Trieste*, the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div., of *Trento* and *Bologna* was back in the immense space and uncontrolled outbursts of any mechanized unit would cause the British

collapse or almost. Further south, in the afternoon, the fire of the artillery of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corp strikes on the positions abandoned by the Italian X Corp. Leaves also perplexed the order given that evening by Lumsden to focus on Ghazal station, once unlocked the opening. It is not clear, in other words, neither the usefulness of a maneuver so narrow beam or the disproportion between the massive armor used and the amount of prey to catch: at most the 90<sup>th</sup> Light and some Italian units.

Finally, without going into the regulations issued later for the exploitation of success, matters not covered here, it should be noted that on the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> showed the golden opportunity to capture a large part hit of the ACIT, yet was left to quietly fade away.

Orders for retreat. So far we have basically shared thoughts and decisions of Rommel; Now the situation is different, at least in part. The field marshal was made guilt of having abandoned the Italian infantry in the desert. To clear the ground by the big accusation, we will say at once that when he determined not to comply with the constraints imposed by Hitler and Mussolini and, consequently, he circulated among the order of withdrawal of Fuka, no longer had any practical possibility: the fate infantry left without transport (brigade Ramcke included) was marked. As to the statement of Montgomery: *"The Italian divisions to the south, in front of 13<sup>th</sup> Corp, they could do nothing but surrender; could not escape because "the Germans had taken all their vehicles" , <sup>(116)</sup> although supported by others, it is contrary to the truth and no Italian captain has ever claimed such a thing. The best refutation may be that provided by Bastico. While noting not have ample information of the events, he did not hesitate to write "We (...) we can not really share so malicious and reckless judgment"<sup>(117)</sup>.*

Surely many cases, isolated or not, of itself robbery occurred, but who saw vehicles in German hands was also kept in mind that for some time a Italian truck group reinforced the ally (and it would have been naive to ask for it in those circumstances ) and, above all, that many trucks abandoned damaged in the desert were released into the efficiency of the German workshops becoming automatically Germanic, whatever their origin.

That said, let's move to the basic question. The evening of October 28 the Command of the ACIT moved west of El Daba. It was the first sign of the doubt. On November 2, at 19:30, began the

branch executive orders for disengagement and retreat of DAK, XX and XXI Corps on the track of Sidi Abdel Rahman and the X Corp positions of the end of August; and the guidelines on the withdrawal of Fuka. The delegation of the Italian Intendenza was simply Ignored.

In the late morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Rommel decided to take advantage of the established temporary British inactivity and continue straight for Fuka. We know the priorities: first the northern sector (almost all German), then the middle one (almost all Italian) under the protection of the armored divisions. "*Brigade Ramcke & X Corps remain for now in the old positions [in late August]*" said the phonogram. Apart from the fact that then there came an order of Hitler to stop it, the order seems significant. Admitted that the German units, the XX and XXI Corp did in time, there could be no illusion of the troops deployed in the south managed to escape. They were already mentally convicted.

Mind you, by giving precedence to the infantry you would have gone to the meeting giving validation to risk that their enormous slowness of movement would compromise the entire army; therefore it may be accorded the status of the decision sad necessity. Moreover the same Bastico did not hesitate: "*If the army had waited, to retreat, to be reached by the X Corps, was definitely and completely destroyed. Its Command would, that is, committed a grave mistake.*"

Less acceptable is instead the contradiction between the order mentioned and what we read in the papers of Rommel: "The 90<sup>th</sup> Light, the DAK and Italian XX Corp had to fall back slowly so as to allow the march or transportation of the divisions left without transport" <sup>(118)</sup>. Very vague and too inaccurate, to say the least.

Italian troops of the ACIT were supplied by the delegation of Intendenza n. 3 (Leut. Col. Soldani), in the employ of the Intendenza N.A. (Gen. Palma) whose registered office was at Tobruk. The bulk of the services of the delegation was stationed in Matruh, along with a main hospital (480 beds) and one subsidiary (370 beds). El Daba was set up a logistics center together with an advanced health center (300 beds). The logistical support of German troops was the responsibility for the *Oberquartiermeister* (Maj. Otto), with its organs services. Relations between the two logistics leaders were excellent.

That morning, as the troops completed the movements started overnight and continued displacements of the base of

army corps and divisional westward, Leut. Col. Soldani had learned from Mancinelli order of Rommel about withdrawal as a first step in Fuka and then east of Matruh. Consequently he ordered immediately that the logistics center of El Daba would send field hospitals, a part of the organs of subsistence and the baggage of the various services directly to Tobruk, and withdraw with the bulk on Matruh.

But around 18:00 Mancinelli he made known the countermand and then Soldani changed the initial decision, in the sense of leaving in place the logistics center but lightened to the maximum and replenished based on consumptions<sup>(119)</sup>. Later, at 22:00, he arrived at Matruh Maj. Otto, who confirmed the news but appeared quite optimistic.

The morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> Soldani returned to El Daba, crossing, as was to report to the Gen. Palma, *"an unbroken column of German vehicles (punctuated occasionally by a vehicle Italian) that brings in except tables, carpets, washbasins etc."*. He spoke with Mancinelli and, as the situation unchanged, returned to Matruh. Rommel noted that at the same time on the coastal road *"there was a big traffic jam of vehicles, especially Italians"* but his memories are rather confused. Indeed, he continued: *"In dense columns our vehicles flowed westward. The Italian infantry proceeded on foot and the street was crowded, "which is surprising because the Italian troops were stranded far from coastal roadway."*

At 15:30, as we know, the ACIT Command circulated among the order of general retreat. *"Fold the new deployment zone south of Fuka"*.<sup>(120)</sup> Evidently he was referring and following the requirements of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, but circumstances had changed significantly. Without much exaggeration, it can be compared to a *"every man for himself."*

The framework of disorientation, especially Italian, would not be complete if not accompanied by a very significant clarification. The intermingling of units, designed and implemented with the best intentions in the world, had created situations particularly cumbersome during battles thanks to the extreme goodwill of the Italian commanders at all levels. For example, the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. and the Ramcke brigade, subordinate employment respectively to XXI and X Corps, always received direct orders from the ACIT Command, without the Italian commands were not even informed for knowledge.

So sometimes German units that were or appeared in an Italian fighting sector for a while, then suddenly went away, of a higher order of course, without the thought of starting the control of the area, nor, even less, the adjacent units . Of everything

what happened in the German camp, the Corps and the Italian divisions were known only in general terms and after the fact. So sometimes they lost news of Italian troops, or were spreading rumors of local failures due (of course) to poor Italian resistance. It is true that sometimes followed a formal apology from the German commanders, but it remained rather annoying<sup>(121)</sup>.

However this ally behavior was taken with philosophy and we must agree that not influenced in the performance of struggle. At the time of retreat it flashed the moment of truth. All Italians units employed tactics of the Germans were "*give it up*" where they were, without a hint of warning or a word of guidance. The seriousness of such conduct lies especially in the fact that the units involved were linked to the system of Germanic transmission, either directly or through liaison officers. The unexpected disappearance of Germans commands provoked then a pernicious confusion<sup>(122)</sup>.

Late in the evening of the 4<sup>th</sup> the Italian liaison officer at the *Oberquartiermeister* phoned the delegation of the Intendenza that the situation was again precipitated and that the army and the German commissariat were withdrawing. Immediately Leut. Col. Soldani picked twenty trucks, all those available, and sent them to the logistics center of El Daba with the order to salvage. Nobody arrived at their destination, in return at 09:45 the following morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> by a police motorcyclist Soldani received a note written by the head to the logistics center, "*Here are reports that more catastrophic, especially by the Germans, who have dropped everything and run westward (...)*"<sup>(123)</sup>.

Gen. Barbasetti phrased it so bitter against the command of the army:

"It appears that the ACIT command has secured in time whether or not the X Corp to retire; neither was given to the X Corp - both well in extremis - a active task for the benefit of the overall economy of the action, which could be, for example, to turn against the side of the British columns advancing north "<sup>(124)</sup>.

Some final words. It seems almost absurd to look good, large and small operations of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army from October 23 to November 4, never reached a full result (when they reached it) and yet the ACIT came out exhausted. And that basically was the tactic of Montgomery. The maneuvers Napoleon left him indifferent. He simply wanted to win and win in a total way. Since the opponent made the mistake of accepting a static battle and in so precarious conditions of supply logistics, he took the opportunity to make him dance



his music, as he liked to say. And aside from all the notes of excessive power considerations, it would be unfair and superficial not to recognize the weight determination and swaggering from Montgomery took from the victory of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army.

You do not have precise data on the losses before 4 November. The winner complained 2,350 dead, 8,500 wounded and 2,260 missing; the ACIT was probably 4-5,000 people dead or missing, and wounded 7-8,000, 67,000 prisoners, all figures expected to rise significantly since the early days of the retreat, so as to reach a total of 9,000 dead or missing, 15,000 injured and 35,000 prisoners.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Army lost 150 tanks (destroyed) of about 500 put out of action and more than a hundred pieces of various caliber. The ACIT left on the battlefield a thousand vehicles of destroyed, damaged and abandoned and over 400 tanks, including destroyed and out of action, of the initial 500.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TEN

- 1 Historical Diary of XXI Corp , date 23.10.1942.
- 2 CARVER M., op. cited above, pp. 198-199.
- 3 *Ibid*, p. 204.
- 4 Relying also on the 4<sup>th</sup> Battery of 47 of the 185<sup>th</sup> artillery battery, the 47 cannons company of the 186<sup>th</sup> infantry, two platoons of cannons of the V/8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri remained temporarily in place.
- 5 The performance of the fighting has been rebuilt with a certain approximation, taking into account the indications of JEAN-NOEL VINCENT, *Les Forces Francaises dans la lutte contre l'Axe en Afrique*, Vincennes in 1983, and of the testimony of RENATO MIGLIAVACCA, *La Folgore nella battaglia di El Alamein*, Auriga, Milan 1983 and *Gli artiglieri della Folgore a Naqb Rala*, USSME, Historical memories military in 1979.
- 6 The data of M. CARVER, (op. Cited above, p. 220). According to R. WALKER New Zealanders were 420 injured or missing and 41 dead (op. Cited above, p. 287).
- 7 B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs* cit., P. 129.
- 8 Historical Diary of XXI Corp, date 24.10.1942.
- 9 CARVER M., op. cited above, p. 223.
- 10 The failure was strangely -or perhaps not strangely -attributed especially to the intervention of the German 33<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn.. According to the official account, which has been taken fully into consideration in the narrative of the fighting, "at 07:00 a German armored recon group AA.33 counterattacks the II Battalion. Foreign Legion with 5 armored cars" and started to retreat, "The latter [the 6th Company, intake passage from the shooting of the Italian armored cars .... " However, referring to an hour between 7.30 and 8.30, he adds: "The Leut. Col. Amilakvari communicates to Gen. Koenig was forced to abandon the goal following a counterattack of six armored cars and many ... " A.N VINCENT, op. cited above, pp. 208-209).
- 11 Surely it is astonishing the apathy shown by the captain and driver, both well proven by Rommel. Mancinelli had to observe: "I found in the environment of the German High Command, on that occasion, or perhaps I seemed to find a strange reluctance to talk about the baffling incident, as if you wanted to hide something, however, he did not want to talk more widely "(op. cited above, p. 188).
- 12 B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs* cit., P. 130. The rebuke was unfair because, apparently, Gatehouse had temporarily left their Tactical Command, at the rear of the 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Bd., To go to the main one, where he would be available by phone if Montgomery had wanted to talk to him.
- 13 According to Gatehouse, which incidentally opened his telephone conversation with a "What the hell is going on? ", Talk with Montgomery would take place after the return of Lumsden from the meeting (C. BARNETT, op. Cited above, p. 395).
- 14 B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs* cit., P. 130.
- 15 The news of the death of Stumme was known the evening of the 25<sup>th</sup> together with that of the return of Rommel, however, figured in the information bulletin of the Army only on the 28<sup>th</sup> for reasons of secrecy against *Ultra* (F.H. Hinsley, op. Cited above, p. 440).
- 16 B. Liddell HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 305. The calculation of Rommel was based of course on the unit fuel of the army, and not about one hundred kilometers of each means.
- 17 *Ibid*. To be precise with a Heinkel flew up to Crete, where the Gen. von Waldau provided a modern Dornier 217 until Qasaba, Egypt. Here he took his Storch.
- 18 It was estimated that in the artillery preparation of the 23<sup>rd</sup> evening had been fired at least 130,000 shots altogether.
- 19 B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 305. In the report released the same evening of the 25<sup>th</sup> stands out a sentence: "An immediate, fundamental improvement of the ammunition and fuel supply must therefore urgently and is a prerequisite for a successful resistance to an attack of relatively long duration."

- 20 E. ROMMEL, Op. Cited above, p. 254.
- 21 M. CARVER reported an assessment of losses of the ACIT drawn up by the 8th Army Intelligence that has the improbable: the Axis would have lost 61,000 men, 530 tanks, 340 field pieces, 90 pieces from 88, 720 pieces controcarril! The same author says: "*If it was true, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army would no longer have found an opponents in his way*" (op. Cited above, p. 242).
- 22 L. PHILLIPS, *El Alamein*, Garzanti, Milan 1964, p. 209.
- 23 B. MONTGOMERY, *From El Alamein to the Sangro River* cit., P. 30. 24 L. PHILLIPS, op. cited above, p. 212.
- 25 Pienaar said he would not be able to execute the order for lack of transportation. Freyberg, assured himself with his chief of G.S. the availability of trucks from New Zealand, said in a low voice: "*Well! Now I'm going to place myself. He does not like to accept the help of others.*" And, turning to Pienaar, he asked him: "*I am the only means of transport that you care about, Dan? You have no other difficulties?*". "No - responded Pienaar - *not have enough vehicles: that's all.*" "*Then we help you?*" - Freyberg offered with a smile - *I am ready to provide all the means that you need*" (L. PHILLIPS, op. cited above, p. 213).
- 26 B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 310.
- 27 Minutes of the meeting -Annex n. 44.
- 28 L. PHILLIPS, op. cited above, p. 242-243.
- 29 B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs* cit., P. 131.
- 30 B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 310.
- 31 Historical Diary Delesee, tele 5064 date 28.10.1942, 14:30 of Gen. Mancinelli.
- 32 Historical Diary Delesee, tele 5075 date 28.10.1942, 12:30 of Colacit.
- 33 Historical Diary Delesee, tele 33251/Op. date 28.10.1942, 22:40 hours of the Comando Supremo.
- 34 Cavallero *Diary*, date 29.10.1942.
- 35 B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 312.
- 36 Historic Diary Delesee, tele s.n. date 10.29.1942. With regard to the needs of staff, it is worth mentioning a letter to Delesee Statesercito about the situation of Radio Officers at the large units, which was that "by not ensuring even use of the r. t. stations available at subordinate infantry and artillery units. " The request is manifested in 400 Radio Officers infantry and 350 artillery, of course "ready to use" (Delesee, f. 3641/ Ord. Date 31/10/1942).
- 37 Report Maj. Pistotti date 10/31/1942.
- 38 E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, pp. 272-273.
- 39 Cavallero *Diary*, date 29.10.1942.
- 40 Historic Diary Delesee, f. SD/196 /Segr. date 10.29.1942, attachment no. 45.
- 41 DSCS, tele 33254/Op. date 10.29.1942, 11:56 hours.
- 42 DSCS, tele 33210/Op. date 10.26.1942, 12: "Trusted source gives the following information on enemy plan. Frontal attack along coastal route, bypassing along northern edge Qattara depression. A simultaneous landings at Ras bu Laho & Zauiet Harun & Marsa Matruk. Frontal attack with two armored brigades mixed of 1,100 tanks, four infantry divisions, 3,000 aircraft. Outflanking action with 550 medium & light tanks & infantry. "
- 43 H.O. BEHRENDT, op. cited above, p. 252. The concern about the possible origins of depression and remained until 2 November the ACIT ordered repeatedly to XX Corp Command to intensify surveillance of the northern edge: "*It is particularly important that the Qattara Depression is accurately and continuously observed and supervised by South end of Mungar Related Areas in Abu Naqb Dweis*" prescribed an order of 21.48 of November.
- 44 F.H. Hinsley, op. cited above, p. 441.
- 45 B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs* cit., P. 132. It is curious how an event can be described according to different versions. As reported in the text takes into account a clarification of de Guingand appeared in an article by *The Sunday Times* of 10/21/1962. Alexander instead is expressed in a different way: "Yet (...) the morning of the 29th we received some information that led us to completely change the direction of our attack (...). Rommel took the 90th Light to Sidi Abd el Rahman, leaving the care of *Trieste* oppose the initial beachhead, where now we set ourselves on the defensive. This lessened the chance to get a decisive breakthrough along the coast road, but I considered that we could turn the situation to our advantage and so on. "(D'El Alamein à Tunis cit., P. 57).

However, the same Alexander elsewhere attributed all the merit of the decision to McCreery: "*The commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army seemed favorable to an attack as far north as possible. But Dick McCreery, from experienced tank commander armed strongly supported the need for the drive just north of the northern corridor exists. I have no doubt that this was the key decision of the Battle of El Alamein, I have no doubt that Monty was substantially grateful to my Chief of Staff*" (Memoirs cit., P. 41).

46 A. BRYANT, op. cited above, pp. 469-470.

47 W. CHURCHILL, op. cited above, pp. 214-215.

48 DSCS, tele 5096 date 30.10.1942, at 11:15 of Gen. Mancinelli, decrypted at the Comando Supremo at 18:00 of October 31 (the telegram was in fact repeated). Note that, strangely, does not figure in the incoming dispatch of Deleaze historical journal; however, a record of Barbasetti on tele 5172 date 02.11.1942, 20:50 hours of Mancinelli, indicates it arrived.

49 From the 24<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> the Littorio had lost a total of 32 officers and 278 non-commissioned officers and troops. They were hit 80 tanks, of which half serviceable; 8 semoventi, all serviceable; 11 pieces to 88, three of them serviceable.

50 Historical Diary Deleaze, tele 5127 date 10.31.1942, 11:10 hours of Gen. Mancinelli.

51 *Ibid*, 5128 tele date 31.10.1942, 11:30 am Gen. Mancinelli.

52 G. MANCINELLI, op. cited above, pp. 197-198.

53 *Ibid*. The episode is narrated and stressed from the same author in AA.VV., *Storia della seconda guerra mondiale* cited. In this venue, indeed, Mancinelli let out a harsh comment: "*I had to dwell on this in particular because it lies without doubt the origin, not of defeat that was now marked and inevitable, but the extent of losses in defeat, especially on the part of the Italian unit*" (vol. III, pp. 330-331).

54 Order of operations date 30/10/1942 -Annex n. 46.

55 The 8th Army had 250 more efficient tanks of various types (including 97 Stuart) in units not directly involved in *Supercharge* well as about 200 vehicles in repair.

56 L. PHILLIPS, op. cited above, p. 270.

57 B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 316.

58 *Ibid*.

59 Cavallero *Diary*, date 01.11.1942.

60 The 61<sup>st</sup> Inf. had the second battalion, resulting from the fusion of the I and II, and the III battalion completed 200 new arrivals. The I had been a battalion of *Lupi di Toscana* Inf. Di /v. expected at Matruh on November 2. The 62<sup>nd</sup> Inf. was on two battalions: the I from the *Piceno* Inf. Div, and on arrival, and the second resulting from the merger of the original three battalions.

61 Historical Diary Deleaze, tele 4394 / Sit. date 10.31.1942, 22:15 hours. As for transport and fuel, Barbasetti had answered Mancinelli: "*Availability fuel is for now ensured; when any operation will be that which will result from supplies. Vehicles are committed to Tripoli at El Daba & considered if needs increase supply & you will need to bring on the new line as necessary for resistance. He excludes the possibility collecting considerable number, after all could be ceded 150 to 170 trucks including heavy rate trailers that would made to flow to the X CA starting from Marsa Matruh not before 2 or 3 November.*"

62 L. PHILLIPS, op. cited above, p. 290.

63 B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 317.

64 Arrived regiments of the 2nd Arm. Bd., The commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers met Currie, who, pointing to the explosions and mass of clouds of smoke to the west, he said, "*Well, we have a breach in the barrage of anti-tank guns, and his team has to go, and go damn fast.*" The commander of the Lancers looked, then said, "*I've never seen anything less like a breach, general.*" Currie replied dryly, and the other went off to report the order (L. PHILLIPS, op. Cited above, p. 295).

65 The commander of a squad he described the raid in a very colorful. In the darkness the ride took place in peace, evidently being Italian squads exchanged for Germans and vice versa. "*When light arose we watched amazed (...) our enemies could not be persuaded of our presence (...). We passed on the fly a few meters from a whole battery of field guns, and we reached a group of German stopped next to the guns that, fortunately, did not shoot. A soldier saw that we were British and ran to tell a colleague; They both watched with incredulous look.*"

They finished well on the command of the *Trieste* and the services unit of the *Trieste* and, supposedly, the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div.:

"(...) *The surprise of our enemies was such that we do not even fired a shot. The full light of day we began our work of destruction in the enemy camp. During the first quarter of an hour the two squads burned forty vehicles (...). The other men took possession of Italian trucks armed with Breda guns and so continued our raid. The Germans took refuge in the trenches nearby (...).*" (By M. CARVER, op. Cited above, pp. 286-288).

66 According to the report of Gen. La Ferla, at 08:00 Lt. Col. Gierling, German liaison officer, "*a source tells me that CTA there were infiltration (I) English in front of the I/115<sup>th</sup> north of our 65<sup>th</sup>, and to restore the situation will be carried out attack by tank formations from north west and west.*"

67 B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 318. D. Irving brings a record of Leut. Berndt in Rommel's diary: "*The night [2] countless trucks and wagons of the armored division Littorio, covered with clusters of soldiers, march on the road, in full retreat. The Afrika Korps refers Littorio that is out of officer's control: it is just melted. Its elements are in route. Symptoms not dissimilar are reported about the mechanized infantry division of Trieste.*" (Op. Cited. P. 244). Nor does it seem necessary to point out the absurdity of the image.

68 Historical Diary Deleaze, tele 5172 date 11.02.1942, at 20:50 of Gen. Mancinelli.

69 D. IRVING, op. cited above, p. 242. See. F. H. Hinsley, op. cited above, p. 448.

70 Historical Diary Deleaze, tele n. 5180 date 11.03.1942, at 03:40, the Gen Mancinelli.

71 DSCS, tele. 5166 date 11.02.1942, 12:40 hours of Gen Mancinelli: "*On tank going battle area Tell el Aqqaqir. The enemy seems to have launched a mass of several hundred armed tanks which contrasts very effectively so far our defense.*"

72 Cavallero *Diary*, date 11.02.1942.

73 Historical Diary Deleaze, tele. 4516 / Sit. date 11.02.1942, 18:45.

74 *Ibid*, tele. 33344/Op. date 11.02.1942, 21:15 of the Comando Supremo.

75 The diary documents the phone Cavallero Cavallero with two attachments. For the "release" of Rommel shows the paintings of 5178 Mancinelli sent from the front at 09:15 on November 3: "*Ruggero [= Rommel] had not made a final decision. It is, however, very likely to be implemented folding on meridian line 28 as the first jump; Next to the east Marsa Matruh (...).*"

For the press of Mancinelli combines the situation of 14:00 of the 3<sup>rd</sup> sent by the same Mancinelli at 14:30. It is clear that the placement of the two annexes is wrong. The two press releases referred mentions the text of the diary are respectively the evening bulletin of the ACIT (tele 5180 date 11.03.1942, at 03:40, Mancinelli) and the situation at 17:00 of November 2 (tele 02/11 5172 date. 1942, 20:50 hours), both already cited.

76 Cavallero *Diary*, date 11.03.1942.

77 DSCS, tele 33346/Op. date 11.03.1942, 11:10 hours. It should be noted, at this point, the arbitrary temporal alteration of the facts as stated in the diary published under the title *Comando Supremo*, Cappelli, Bologna, 1948, p. 364. According to this publication the sequence of events of the afternoon of November 2 would be this:

1 - Mancinelli telegram with the situation at 17:00 (tele n. 5172);

2 - Response of Cavallero, on behalf of Mussolini, Rommel to stop at any cost on the front of El Alamein (tele 33346/Op.);

3rd - Meeting with Kesselring and von Rintelen.

In reality the two telegrams belong on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and November 2 and there is no mention of them in the original text of the diary on the date in question. In fact, the telegram 5172 of Mancinelli was filled with 20:50 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and reached Rome in the night and tele 33346 Cavallero was prepared at 11:10 of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and not so much in response to the situation of the 17:00 of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, as to the evening bulletin of the ACIT, arrived in Rome in the early morning hours of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, both the High Command and to von Rintelen for different channel.

78 This is the meridian section 850 kilometer network of orthogonal reported on the Egyptian cartography.

- 79 B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 320.
- 80 At 14:30 Gen. Mancinelli telegraphed to the Comando Supremo and Delesee "Situation 14:00 hours. Nothing significant to report" (DSCS, tele. 5195 date 03/11/1942).
- 81 Tele 133/42 date 03.11.1942, no time group.
- 82 E. ROMMEL, *op. cited* above, p. 284. Highlights are the fact that the psychological climate in the X Corps was different from that of other corps, as after violent attacks of the early days, all bloodily repulsed, was replaced by a operational relative stagnation. The order of withdraw literally caught troops off guard, who expressed their regret at having to give up positions so brilliantly defended and still very solid.
- 83 DSCS, tele. 5198, date 03.11.1942, 19:50 hours, Gen. Mancinelli.
- 84 At the same time the operation *Grapeshot* was prepared namely the hasty race a big mechanized force for Tobruk, to capture the fort before it was organized in defense. For such an undertaking had been foreseen: the Command 8<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. (Gen. Gairdner), the 23<sup>rd</sup> Arm. Bd., 5<sup>th</sup> horse artillery, a motorized battalion and one machine-gun, and anti-aircraft anti-tank and engineers units. In this force they had to join the *Royal Dragoons* and 4<sup>th</sup> South Africa armored cars. Given the course of events, the idea was abandoned.
- 85 L. PHILLIPS, *op. cited*, p. 316
- 86 A. KESSELRING, *op. cited* above, p. 137.
- 87 E. ROMMEL, *op. cited* above, p. 285.
- 88 *Ibid*, p. 286.
- 89 See. KESSELRING A., *op. cited* above, p. 137; B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 322, note Manfred Rommel; D. IRVING, *op. cited* above, pp. 247-248.
- 90 The text above is a faithful translation of the German text shown by von Rintelen Cavallero (See. Cavallero diary date 04/11/1942). In contrast, the English version includes a paragraph dedicated to the Italians: "*We can not expect new German forces. It added that the Italian troops are no longer in fighting capacity because of the great superiority enemy on the ground and in the air. Italian infantry elements have already abandoned positions in the dark without order* (ISO Playfair, *op. Cited* above, p. 476-477). We do not know if the sheet von Rintelen was *ad usum Delphini*.
- 91 The 133<sup>rd</sup> Tank had formed a battalion putting together some twenty tanks, five remained, many drawn from the workshops and all the command tanks and radios found. The purpose was to give the impression of a efficient unit.
- 92 According to de Guingand, while the success of *Supercharge* was being outlined (ie in the late morning) von Thoma phoned Rommel communicating and south of the DAK the enemy had broken the front. Rommel would say doubting the accuracy of the report, as nothing had been reported by Navarini, and be thinking of the *Trieste*. But "*the Italians - observed de Guingand -they were probably in a state of mental panic so great to feel that anyone knew what was happening*" (*op. Cit.*, P. 208). Von Thoma then decided to go and see for himself. This reconstruction differs somewhat from the accounts of Rommel and Bayerlein, however, even if the Italian Commands were" "Bring It" -, says de Guingand, their radio messages came to Commands of the ACIT and DAK, and these heard that up to 13:00 the *Trento* interest and *Ariete* and *Trieste* at least until about 15.30.
- 93 According to the minutes of Col. Bayerlein, von Thoma shortly after dawn had greeted his Chief of Staff, headed south to El Daba to establish the new command post, with his words, "*Bayerlein, the order of Hitler is the product of a diseased brain. I can no longer continue like this. Go to El Daba. I'll stay here and I will personally take charge of the defense of Tell el Mampsra*". At 11:00 the adjutant von Thoma stood by El Daba, saying he was set free by the General and to ignore the lot. Bayerlein immediately boarded a light tank and headed to Tell el Mampsra. There he came, he saw from a distance the tall figure of von Thoma, motionless near a tank on fire, in the midst of the devastation of the battlefield. Moments after the general is handed to a British captain. Then about 300 Germans came out of holes in the desert or from behind the carcasses of destroyed tanks and surrendered themselves. Led by Montgomery, and invited them to dinner, von Thoma met by the commander of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army the latest developments of the situation and, when he learned that British armored "*were already in Fuka*", he commented: "*If so, the Our troops are really in a very serious situation*" (DE GUINGAND, *op. cited*, "p. 209).

94 E. ROMMEL, *Op. Cited* above, p. 288.

95 For the *Ariete* managed to disengage: Division Command, 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri with 200 men, 132<sup>nd</sup> Tank with 31 tanks, 132<sup>nd</sup> Artillery with 17 pieces of which half inefficient. The hundred tanks of which *Ariete* available on site (a battle group of about twenty M 13 and 06 semoventi had been previously sent to the coast to order of the ACIT), thirty were destroyed before 15:30; thirty withdrew in the late afternoon with the remains of the corps; the other 40 were left on the battlefield immobilized. Some fought again and were eliminated in the darkness, one at a time; a few others, repaired the damage, were saved in a piecemeal or in small groups.

96 Historical Diary Deleuse, tele 4480 / Sit. date 11.02.1942, 11:40 hours. Barbasetti alluded to XX Corp truck group heavy loaned temporarily to the Germans in the autumn of 1941, and never returned despite repeated requests.

97 G. MANCINELU, *op. cited* above, p. 201.

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Repeats page 843



- 97 G. MANCINELLI, *Op. Cited above*, p. 201.
- 98 Cavallero *Diary* date 11/04/1942.
- 99 DSCS, tele 33380/Op. date 04.11.1942, 21:55 hours. Not being able to transmit directly to Colacit for unlinking, the dispatch was sent to Deleaze for forwarding. At 08:40 of the 5th it was not yet sent to Mancinelli for lack of connection.
- 100 Cavallero *Diary*, date 04.11.1942.
- 101 *Ibid.*
- 102 DSCS, tele 1048 date 04.11.1942, of 20:00 hours from ACIT, received in Rome the next day at 5 am.
- 103 W. CHURCHILL, *op. cited above*, p. 218.
- 104 B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers* cit., P. 333.
- 105 *Ibid.*, p. 300.
- 106 J.F. C. FULLER, *op. cited above*, pp. 278-279.
- 107 B. MONTGOMERY, *From El Alamein* cit., P. 19. According to the enemy, "the number of German tanks was always a matter of paramount importance. The tanks could be Italian cause for concern, but hardly had influence on the plans' (KIPPENBERGER H., *op. cit.*, p. 205).
- 108 *Ibid.*, p. 21-22.
- 109 A. KESSELRING, *op. cited above*, p. 136. According to someone the forced return of Rommel confirmed the view that he -responsible direct precarious strategic situation in which was the ACIT -he was removed to avoid the risk of encountering a serious staff failure of those same positions whose achievement thanks to him had been previously exalted the same way as an overwhelming victory. Frankly we can not really share a appreciation of the genre.
- 110 On 26 October the Gen. Palma, Intendant AS, wrote to the Head of Delegation no. 3, Leut. Col. Soldani: "I think with real concern that if the first day of battle, that certainly will a very long course, I am asked to send ammunition -not being enough that the 1.5 unfoc there is forward -I should draw the conclusion that in two or three days we will have more ammunition" (Historical journal of the Delegation of Intendenza n. 3, date 27.10.1942).
- 111 M CARVER., *op. cited above*, p. 171.
- 112 B. LIDDELL HART, *History of defeat* cit., P. 282.
- 113 Cavallero *Diary*, date 04.11.1942.
- 114 D. Correlli Barnett, *op. cited above*, p. 400.
- 115 *Ibid.*, p. 408.
- 116 B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs* cit., P. 137.
- 117 Report of Mar. Bastico spring 1943.
- 118 E. Rommel, *op. cited above*, p. 280.
- 119 The heavy material and not-ready employment were started to Matruh and to the health center west of Fuka, where they were already making bases of large units.
- 120 This is the text of the order sent to XXI Corp. We do not know what was transmitted to X and to XX Corp, but it has reason to believe the same.
- 121 A purely by way of example is cited a case. At about 01:00 hours of 29 October, during the Australian attack to the coast, the commander of the 115<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*grenadiere warned the commander of 133<sup>rd</sup> Tank the XXIII/12<sup>th</sup> Bers., deployed on the north end of the field assigned to the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer*, He had surrendered and that his positions had been recaptured by a German company. 02:30 Gen. Biton was presented with by the liaison officer of the 15<sup>th</sup> *Panzer* following message: "The XXIII. Bers. Battalion has retired. The division commander will personally because the battalion to return immediately to occupy its positions which are the nerve center of the battle (order of the army). "You can imagine the feelings that stirred the soul of Biton for the shape and the fact . After prompt investigation it was ascertained that the Bersaglieri were not backed away a millimeter, because not committed unless the battery fire English. at 04:15 Gen. von Vaerst apologized personally with Bitossi. the news was given by mistake by the 90<sup>th</sup> Light, a unit of connection from which he had not found the XXIII. Bers. Battalion for an error of navigation!

- 122 An example for this topic. At about 01:00 of 5 November the commander of the IV Libya Battalion, located in Qattara Spring, in the Matruh, called the Delegation of Intendenza for information. Amazed by a long silence of the 288<sup>th</sup> *Panzergranadiere* (or group Menton), on which it depended, had tried to make contact with the commander of the regiment, but after laborious attempts was learned that the Germans had already been expelled from Matruh a few hours before.
- 123 Historical Diary delegation of the Intendenza n. 3, date 11.05.1942. At about 09:00 in the morning the base of X Corp, back into the night on 03:00 to about thirty kilometers west of El Daba, it was crossed by numerous German trucks while in the rugged terrain on either side of the coastal fled at full speed toward the west. Stopped one of them, the driver quickly explained: "*Tommies, Panzer Tommies kommen!*". So the deputy of the G.S. of the X Corp knew the situation.
- 124 Report of Gen. Barbasetti dated 04/02/1943.

## Chapter Eleven

## CLOSING REMARKS

**1. OPERATIONS**

For Italy, the conduct of operations in 1942 revolves around a name: Malta. The Comando Supremo was obsessed, the two Axis Navies never lost an opportunity to talk and Cavallero always complained the failure to conquer or lasting neutralization. We know that if they do not find credit in history, however, is human consider a unitary whole campaign to try to identify the critical moment. For northern Africa right now it happened in the summer. As fate would have it, two different issues were placed simultaneously on the mat on the circumstances: the occupation of Malta and the offensive in Cyrenaica.

According to Rommel the battle of Ain el-Gazala had to be preceded by the conquest of Malta, but "*for some inexplicable reason, our Headquarters abandoned this program.*" In fact he knew that the operation *Hercules* or C 3 was postponed until after the fall of Tobruk and the achievement of the border, ie in mid-July. He also knew, at least in general terms, the reasons for it: Italy alone was not able to successfully deal with the enterprise; Germany found it difficult to give the aid required by Alliance (a division of paratroopers; vessels and aircraft; 40,000 tons fuel oil for the Royal Marina and 12,000 tons gasoline for Royal Aeronautica). For this Rommel received a free hand: after all had guaranteed to be just a couple of weeks.

At Berchtesgaden, in the conference in late April, the intervention of Kesselring showed decisive. Convinced that the next targets should be made of Malta and Tobruk, both necessary, and initially oriented to prioritize the island, he came to support the proposals of Rommel to make the first ground offensive, just considering the aforesaid temporary hesitation. Then, after the victory at Tobruk and no later than the full moon of July, it would be given during the operation *Hercules*. Meanwhile preparations were carried out at the end, so the enterprise would not present risks of failure. Cavallero, however reluctantly, accepted the change of priorities, realizing that after Kesselring was right to consider that, admitted and not granted immediate setup to

the machine due to the invasion of Malta, the attack on the German-Italian island would induce Auchinleck to jump on Rommel, especially as the air forces of the axis would be diverted from Cyrenaica and the RAF will have dominated almost uncontested.

The resounding victory in Marmarica ended June 21 and immediately Rommel asked the Comando Supremo and to the OKW, by von Rintelen, to focus border "*up in the heart of Egypt*." Despite the splendid success, however, the overall situation had worsened. Malta was recovering fully active offensive and air-naval battle of mid-June had exhausted the last supplies of fuel oil of the Royal Marina: the battleships were immobilized in ports with empty tanks. This just when it appeared the opportunity to lay hands on the question Malta!

Hitler, never thoroughly convinced of the feasibility, rather than opportunity, enterprise and already expressed negatively about the Italian request fuel oil, did respond to Jodl that the surrender of Tobruk had changed circumstances and that consequently the conquest of Malta It seemed more necessary. They smiled the tantalizing prospect of more terrestrial triumphs ventilated by Rommel, who according to Kesselring exerted influence on Hitler almost hypnotic; convenience to exploit the success all the way to take advantage of the English *debacle*; the immense booty collected in Tobruk, which allowed to power of effort in depth; the fact that in any case until August now you could not launch *Hercules*, as admitted by the Duce (ie Cavallero) in his letter of June 20 to the Führer.

Of course there was also a downside: the air force would be more and more embroiled in the fighting in North Africa, German air units had to leave Sicily in the immediate future and, mainly, the exploitation of success would not have taken place against the remnants of the forces Ritchie en route, as claimed Rommel, but against the 8<sup>th</sup> Army that Auchinleck intended remove from the enemy with a maneuver in retreat.

For Hitler counted the positive factors, given that coincided with his deep aversion to *Hercules*, and persuaded Mussolini that "*in this historic hour that is not repeated*," it was necessary to catch on the fly, "*the goddess of battle*." Mussolini had already convinced for own account and the emphasis of Hitler changed even the belief in enthusiasm. Cavallero was so isolated. For a while had the illusion of matter simply being postponed, especially considering the incompleteness of the preparations; but soon he realized that the problem of Malta was for the OKW had passed, at least as an occupation. There remained one last

slim hope: that the island could be neutralized if necessary from the air.

In fact, the talks concluded on June 26 at the Italian-German command of the army seems to have ended up influencing the same Cavallero. The directives issued by Bastico, formal order of Mussolini, accepted in full the desire to get Rommel to the Suez Canal. Now also for Italy Malta it was a closed chapter; in fact, just returned to Rome (July 7), Cavallero provision for the transformation of the operation C 3 into operation C 4 (occupation of Tunisia), and the 27<sup>th</sup> of that month warned leaders of the G.S. the three armed forces that *"the general situation and weather conditions make it impossible to predict, for the current year, to make operation C 3"*.

After the failure of the Battle of Alam el Halfa and the sinking of a large number of ships could be read in the diary of Cavallero (5 September) that *"Malta should definitely be put back under pressure (...). After neutralization of Malta will win all the battles in Africa. If you do not neutralize we will lose all."* It might reasonably argue that it was not only to neutralize: it would no longer be sufficient, however, possible. You will touch with hand in October. On September 8, the *Seekriegsleitung* wrote:

"To maintain our position in the Mediterranean, to protect Italy, preventing the expected British offensive, send a empty design of a solid enemy defensive front and set the scene for a direct link between Germany and Japan, the General Staff of the Navy believes which should be subject to the following conditions:

1. North Africa should be maintained, as long as possible, from the positions of El Alamein.
2. The Luftwaffe must be strongly reinforced.
3. Malta is to be taken.
4. The plan for an offensive towards Suez to launch at a later time to be in tune with the above."

The note was accompanied by a cautious added: *"As long as there has not arrived other news, this opinion should not be forwarded."*

It is also worth noting that Rommel, who had so much influence on Hitler to sacrifice Malta to the Suez Canal, until the end of his diary he admitted that one of the necessary steps to ensure regular supply of the operations in Africa was that *"Malta It had to be attacked and taken."* But now it had faded in the mirage of the Egyptian desert. *"Surrender of the enterprise - Commented Kesselring - constituted a fatal blow for the entire campaign in North Africa."* Author of this death blow had been personally Hitler, who never gave the great theater of operations in the Mediterranean forces needed at the right time.

Just it does not seem that neither Cavallero nor Supermarina have any liability whatsoever in this error (always limiting to 1942). The tombstone on the issue was placed by the letter from Hitler to Mussolini on 23 June. October 19 Cavallero told Fougier, which seemed rather pessimistic about the Kesselring offensive air on the island, that "*Malta means winning or losing the war.*" But by then it was a catchphrase. The next day, just as Kesselring threw in the towel, the following conversation took place between Mussolini and Cavallero:

M.: "You know, all things considered, I have come to the conclusion that instead of advancing on Marsa Matruh was better to make the operation of Malta."

C.: "Duce, you understand that you feel in front of a case of conscience, but let me ease your concern. The operation of Malta was prepared for August; the opportunity to march into Egypt came about after the enterprise of Tobruk took place in June. "

M.: "Yes, I made that decision even after the news of the Führer about the breakup of the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army."

C.: "Besides, we did not have the choice, both for the time, as I said, both because Rommel had left on his behalf, saying: I have orders from the Führer: I hope that Italians follow me."

M.: "Certainly if the operation on Malta was ready at that time it was better to do this operation."

C.: "You see, the day when you took the decision to move to Egypt will I presented a brief memo in which he said, is good progress in Egypt, but the fact remains the problem of the situation in the Mediterranean and that we must beat Malta . The problem of oil remained then as now a fundamental problem to be solved. Then as now: fuel oil and neutralization of Malta" <sup>(1)</sup>.

It is not really possible to attribute the failure to conquer Malta the decisive weight of the defeat of the Axis in North Africa? According to certain capture of the island would solve every problem of supply and therefore, automatically, secured victory at El Alamein and the achievement of the Channel with incalculable consequences. It is an opinion which is based on the incidence heavy that Malta English had in the general economy of the war both for his offensive ability is, as rightly argued, for the very existence. It was not only the losses caused by aircraft and submarine base on the island, but also the enormous burden imposed by escorting convoys that were not attacked, but they could be,

and from the commitment of the R. Aeronautica and the Luftwaffe were forced to spend on Malta <sup>(2)</sup>.

Conversely you do not have to ignore some facts. It is true that Malta exercised an aerial threat of unquestionable effectiveness, but undeniably this was limited to the central Mediterranean and, once passed the meridian of Gaudo, was replaced by the offense from Egypt. As for submarines, absent from the island during late April-late July, they could quietly from Alexandria, from Haifa, Beirut and also from Gibraltar. Also in August a large part of the losses of the ship bound for Benghazi, Tobruk and Marsa Matruh was the prerogative of planes or submarines from Egypt or the Middle East. So employment or, even less, the neutralization of Malta would not be sufficient to give confidence to our overseas transport. It would have taken the simultaneous neutralization of ports and airports in Egypt and the Middle East (impossible) or the continuity of an efficient service of reconnaissance and security and an equally effective service of escorting convoys (also impossible).

Basically it seems possible to conclude that -a regardless enormous mistake of having dropped the chance to conquer Malta during the summer - the occupation of the island would have greatly facilitated but solved only half the problem of supplies. And, the overall plan of the war in North Africa, even though a happy outcome of C 3 had added a victorious outcome of the defensive battle of El Alamein, certainly many things would be easier, but there can be no illusion the conclusion would have been different: *Torch* was not a joke and Rommel was forced to retreat, closely followed step by step in Tripolitania by Montgomery.

Let us now turn to a second controversial topic: the race to the Canal after the fall of Tobruk. First we need to consider the issue from the point of view of Rommel. From personal experience he was convinced that in the desert war the winning factor was constituted by the formula power x speed. The axes of the game were armored units and had to be played without hesitation, even with boldness.

"The operational and tactical audacity - he specifies to Rommel, who showed increasingly sensitive to allegations of recklessness made against him by many - not be confused with military gambling. **Bold** is an operation that only possibly leads to the desired success, but with which, even in case of

botched, he still is holding enough to dominate the situation. Gambling, however, is a maneuver that can lead either to victory or annihilation of their own units. There are also situations that justify such a measure, especially when, in the normal course of events, the defeat was a matter of time and gain does not matter and the only possibility still exists is a extraordinarily risky operation" <sup>(3)</sup> .

As a basic strategic principle requires not giving the beaten enemy time to regroup, Rommel wanted to build on the success immediately and thoroughly. His arguments in favor are well known. The 8<sup>th</sup> Army was now *extremely weak*, so it had to be achieved before he received reinforcements from the Middle East and destroy it; then it was the turn of the few fresh British troops. The Italian Comando Supremo stated that "*only after the ports of Tobruk and Marsa Matruh had fallen into the hands of the Axis, would be guaranteed the dispatch of supplies to Africa to the extent necessary*" and still the only spoils of Tobruk allowed the continuation of the offensive, so there was no danger of running aground for lack of supply logistics.

"This was a plan that could possibly succeed - concluded Rommel- and deserved to be tried. The transaction would not in any way put at stake the existence of the army. Adapting to the circumstances, we could get by in any situation"<sup>(4)</sup>.

In addition to these assessments are of an operational nature, it is very likely that Rommel has suffered from a sense of superiority, against the Comando Supremo and the Comando Superiore, which led him to reject a serene and objective joint examination of the possible courses of action. A sullen attitude that was originally presumed, in the safeguard measures and in the bonds put to him from the beginning of the reconquest of Cyrenaica, in January of that year. He had always bite the brake and often made his own and the facts they had given him always right.

For el-Agheila had been granted just a pricking offensive of a limited range and, along the way, only the intervention of Mussolini had authorized the capture of Benghazi, however, imposing the gravitational armored mass to Ajdabiya and maintenance of the defensive position of el -Agheila. After Benghazi he had continued through until the Gebel el- Tmimi Mechili line, against the advice of Cavallero, who insisted in the Directive to "*ensure at any time and in any situation in the defense of Tripoli.*" The offensive



Ain el-Gazala was preceded by much persuasion and laborious discussions to carry out all the necessary forces and to conduct the preliminary deployment in front of the British positions. The conquest of Tobruk was also seen with many doubts and subject to time limits (20 June) and space: if the attack had failed the Panzerarmee needed to be halted on the positions of Ain el-Gazala, if the favorable mass of the army was not to exceed the line Sollum- Halfaya-Sidi Omar. Of course the objections of Cavallero (Bastico, after all, was more inclined to favor initiatives) is not derived from spiteful positions. As sometimes questionable, they were dependent on Italian real difficulties in the deployment of large units or supplies.

Now, from el-Agheila on reasoning and instinct had given an unexpected success by all Rommel and his boldness was always rewarded ... the unfortunate conduct of operations by Ritchie. Therefore, as surely modesty was not among his best qualities, Field Marshal felt psychologically unwilling to accept advice and even Italian directives that could compress his freedom of action. And, always psychologically, he was too underestimating the action command of the opposing party.

Was right or wrong, Rommel, to want to continue in the heart of Egypt? Cavallero considered the question in the logistics: the advance towards the Canal seemed possible only on condition of guaranteeing supplies overseas, and as these without the occupation of Malta were not sure it followed the arrest on the positions of the frontier. A positive rethinking of Hitler and the shape of the operation C 3 in August, as expected, in theory it would therefore induced to share the convenience of continuing the offensive, but he knew that to give more than two months to the 8<sup>th</sup> Army meant put it back up stronger than before. Ultimately, in his view positions Sollum-Halfaya-Sidi Omar represented the limit of advance. Bastico had no hesitation: the army had to stop at the ridge of Halfaya, pushing elements up to Matruh, but said in no uncertain terms that it was not worth even bother to discuss the emphatic view of things Rommel, who had seen the *placet*\* of Hitler .

Kesselring seems the one who best knew how to draw the outlines of the problem, weighing favorable aspects and negative aspects. In summary, and without going into details already known: for the time the OBS was not able to neutralize Malta; there were some difficulties to move airbases to the east but you could put

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Latin = it pleases

the Aviation extent of supporting the army; the enemy was not destroyed in Marmarica retreated more and more improved his position; an extended until Canal presented the risk of a new confrontation of forces in an inferior position to the axis. In short: absolutely not an offensive thoroughly, yes to continue until the close of El Alamein.

We know the conclusion. At the end of a global meeting in which Rommel performed an amazing security as an irritating arrogance, due of course to the approval of Hitler, Cavallero adapted it too. His directives indicated the narrows of El Alamein which goal the exploitation of success and at the same time as a starting point for future offensive that would have the ultimate goal of the Canal. Summing up, it seems you can move much criticism to Rommel, since all those involved, except Bastico, eventually align itself about the fatal race to El Alamein. The next step, according to Rommel and directives Cavallero would have end the game, was still to be studied.

It was a mistake to continue immediately on the heels of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army? Here, too, the opinions are divided and many perhaps suggested by hindsight. Not considering the question Malta, the decision does not say wrong *in total* or at least the validity of the justifications seems real. In fact, while providing its share collective euphoria created under Axis which was matched by a known accentuated pessimism in British camp, the cold examination of operational decisions led to find it helpful and risk running up to El Alamein.

"Today, to events - said Navarini - it's easy sentencing after Marsa Matruh the armored army Africa was at its breaking point logistics and, therefore, also tactically.

Then, after the successes achieved, it was logical to think that we have reached the time to be able to act on the assumption that every audacity was not only possible but even a duty"<sup>(5)</sup>.

We must also mention a factor whose weight, whether in Tobruk, in the hour of decision, could escape, appeared clearly at the end of the Battle of Matruh. It is a factor that induced Fuller to say: *"In my view, when an army armored conduct boldly surprising the opponent, his reach of action is not limited to the wear of the media and the possibility of a regular supply."* After Matruh, whatever you argue, even a blind man would have noticed that the framework of logistical support would not allow the army of reach in an acceptable state of consistency at El Alamein. Only

a small portion of the troops could be pushed forward: too little to break the momentum of enemy resistance, "*the last barrier that the British had against our advanced,*" wrote Rommel.

The same Navarini, which was assigned the task of going quickly to El Daba, was forced to admit that

"The tremendous wear and tear suffered by every unit, once in Marsa Matruh, would have constituted a serious obstacle to the continuation of the offensive. To act in depth, as was done, he had to at least be sure that the enemy was actually reduced to the few survivors of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. This was not. "

Undoubtedly, due account being taken of the logistics factor in its broadest sense, now you can recognize that after Matruh boldness became gambling.

Rommel before recently oversaw this factor, considering it the sole Italian responsibility, then poured on it the entire failure of the desperate race to the east. But he, who had under his eyes the continuous shrinking and increasingly apparent wear on the Italian and German divisions, as the value attributed to the clear logistical difficulties, especially in the transport sector for the ordinary way? He seems to have deliberately ignored: we know what condition the *Panzerarmee* has come to the close of El Alamein; nevertheless his shadow was cast immediately assault the British positions, defined by the same Rommel "*greatly fortified and made safe,*" with a more superficial and hasty. It may be that, at that point, still worth the effort to dare; Rommel definitely not fed any doubt on the lucky star. Besides, even von Mellenthin, although aware of the scarcity of armored forces of the army, thought there were hopes of victory by the maneuver, which "*would throw the enemy once more in the stampede.*"

So much for objectivity: in Rome it was assumed success. On July 2, during the stay of Cavallero in Libya, an internal memorandum drawn up by Gen. Fassi, head of operations department of the Comando Supremo and Chief of Staff in August of Deleuse, expressed himself in these terms:

"The successful development of the ongoing operations in Egypt, making it probable occupation to expire near the entire Nile Delta, leads to some considerations on the determination of the following strategic areas of operation.

They could be reduced substantially two:

- a) operations to the west of the Suez Canal (...);
- b) operations to Sudan and later in the upper E.A.I. (...) "

and he envisaged the convenience of leaving the first chance for the Germans, participating with two or three Italian divisions, and second only to the Italian forces.

The first attempt to overwhelm the British lines took on a meaning that any misunderstanding could no longer exist. *"The reaction that the enemy manifested from the outset -recounted Navarini - was that soon convinced us that we have reached the dead point where our meager forces were no longer able to overcome his resistance."* Von Mellenthin confessed sadly that everyone realized that the offensive, which began on May 26 and in which such high hopes were pinned, was received at the end of its run. Even Rommel had to agree that the only chance to overcome the remnants of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and occupy, on the momentum, the territory west of the Canal *"with a coup de main\*\*"* had set forever. But aim at the Canal with a coup and random support not gamble?

The Battle of Alam el Halfa apparently resulted in a stalemate. Actually he proved to be a defensive victory British, of which Montgomery did not take advantage as perhaps he could, and an indisputable sign of impotence Italian-German, from which the Axis controls were unable to reap the consequences.

Rommel fully realized this, but do not shoot the hypothesis put forward on July 17 Cavallero and repeated the following week, between high and low morals, to abandon the positions of El Alamein to steal the bulk of the army to pressure the opponent and maneuver in retreat towards the border. The Comando Supremo and Superlibia, that already in July had blamed this *"tendency to retreat,"* Now, in September, showed a strange tranquility.

Following Mussolini claimed to have foreseen what would happen and declared error failure withdrawal of Italian troops on the Sollum-Halfaya line <sup>(6)</sup>, but evidently had forgotten its guidelines of 19 July, in which invited to prepare in a few weeks the battle of the Delta, prescribed to preserve at all costs the current lines, rejecting *a priori*\* any other reason.

Also on September 7, at Palazzo Venezia, Kesselring would have expressed to Mussolini the view that El Alamein should be kept and that they should not abandon the prospect of a resumption of the offensive towards the canal <sup>(7)</sup>. This particular is not confirmed by Cavallero, attending the interview, but would find greater foothold Mussolini's decision to continue sending fuel to Rommel *"as if the offensive was imminent to start."*

Later, during his visit to the Fuhrer of the end of September, Rommel was quoted unnecessary the abandonment of the positions of El

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\*Latin = from what comes before

\*\*French = with a single blow

Alamein and Hitler was satisfied, as neither he nor the OKW, according to von Rintelen, were inclined to surrender voluntarily of a position reached.

Basically, in September strengthened in all -this Comando Supremo, OKW, to Delease, Command of the ACIT, in troops -the confidence to resist without great apprehensions waiting the offensive of Montgomery and can then resume advance towards the Canal. It is understood that reinforcements were needed, reinforcements, transport, materials, but the Comando Supremo and the OKW gave every assurance.<sup>(8)</sup>

It is at this point that was made the second error, after the abandonment of the enterprise of Malta, and his responsibility before dates back to Rommel. Mancinelli said well. Rommel was not a man to grow at the same time different views: now dominated the belief of being able to deal with a firm foot the enemy and there was no doubt about the safety of the army. In fact he neglected the opportunity to study the retreat of the ACIT for the worst case, what he had just raised, and even paused to choose between roughly maneuver retarding and maneuvering withdraw. It was a serious omission.

As we know, the question of withdrawal exploded during the third battle of El Alamein. A judgment has been claimed that beginning with the Comando Supremo and that of the OKW, it was necessary to stiffen in a fierce resistance to the bitter end, that being the best existing position abroad. For others, however, a timely maneuver in retreat was the only opportunity to fall on deaf ears and the British offensive to save a good part of the army.

Even Alexander the stay on a line so advanced constituted an error. A strong position to set up in Matruh or Sollum-Halfaya, with one echelon coverage pushed or left at El Alamein, *"would present a much more difficult problem to solve."* Elsewhere argued that even a retreat like that *"would have greatly strengthened the positions of the Axis in North Africa and I would not claim that we could in that case defeat the Afrika Korps"*<sup>(9)</sup> With Torch in place? Montgomery merely sentencing: *"If I had not been very firmly and I had not insisted that my plan was executed to the end, we would not have won at El Alamein"*<sup>(10)</sup>.

Auchinleck had chosen to retreat rather than risk the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and stopped only when there remained behind the Delta. He could be or Rommel, knowing they can yield advantage with a few hundred kilometers of desert in Montgomery. In other words, for

the 8th Army's grip El Alamein represented the last resort, but for the ACIT not.

That said and accepted the withdraw immediate response to the warning signs of the offensive, but we must admit that in practice such a simple solution presented many psychological obstacles as to suggest almost destiny. Who, then, should have made the proposal? Rommel before leaving for the license or during his visits to the Comando Superiore or the OKW? Stumme, from just a month sworn in as a substitute? Barbasetti, who was at Ain el Gazala and knew the situation through communications of Mancinelli? Bastico, confined in Tripoli? Kesselring, confessed to principle and conviction in favor of the resistance in place? We know very well what atmosphere pulled in Rome and Rastenburg and, although he later Kesselring felt able to say that the two Axis High Command would accept without too much discussion of a proposal presented by Rommel's retreat, it is believed that such an idea odd would be rejected with contempt and hostility.

It was up therefore to Rommel just returned to Egypt, a battle began. His first concerned reports met skepticism and criticism. The OKW was silent. To Cavallero he was alarmist, for Kesselring undecided, for Goering pessimistic, for Barbasetti uncertain. Cavallero asked to speak, but they did not think to go to the appointment. Barbasetti saw and prayed that his words were brought to the attention of Mussolini only to Cavallero, so the situation was dramatic. Then things fell.

Actually, still 2 November the battle did not seem to Barbasetti compromised not beaten them in danger of circumventing the troops in line, content to the north and south rejected British efforts, heavy losses for the *Trento* and the 164<sup>th</sup> Inf. Div. "*The withdraw – He Commented - It is exclusively the decision of Rommel, based on assessment of the situation*" and to the surprise of X Corp. If this seems too transparent criticism is appropriate against the accusation that he had given orders timely, it services, nor to the sectors of Matrouh and Siwa who depended on the ACIT.

Recall that in the late morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Westphal had provided to the chief operations office of an Italian army corps general guidelines, with a clear reference to November 5: withdrawn to the Fuka line in three stages, with two alternating motorized bands. Vehicles by Italian. A retreat that had little or nothing to do with the one mentioned by Rommel in July and an assumption of vehicles far-fetched. Rommel did not speak on the subject with

Navarini, Nebbia and De Stefanis and it hurts. Not warned Barbasetti to collect the army on the ridge Sollum-Halfaya in case the retreating troops were partly overwhelmed. He did not tell my deputy superintendent, knowing what they were precious few resources.

Remains the last question: was necessary the third battle of El Alamein, after the second had highlighted the end of the advance of the ACIT, when Malta was coming back in full working order and when you knew the imminence of *Torch*? Alexander admitted that that the crash was assigned a political purpose as well as military. Under the first London appearance was intended to induce the French North Africa not to oppose the landings; to cheer the Soviets, bitterly engaged at Stalingrad, to raise morale in Britain and the *Commonwealth*. On the military side, beat Rommel meant advancing toward Tripoli while the troops landed in Morocco and Algeria, thus shortening the time required for total conquest of all the African coast of the Mediterranean.

Alexander then completed his thought by declaring "*certain that the first British army and the American II Corp could never win without aid Tunis and Bizerte.*" In other words, El Alamein helped *Torch* because the 8<sup>th</sup> Army defeated the ACIT clearly and was able to proceed westward to help the Anglo-Americans; operation *Torch* did not help El Alamein because next, it because was a threat in the long term also, and why would not either come alone to Tunis.<sup>(11)</sup>

## 2. LOGISTICS

Usually, with rare exceptions, a first look at the operation of the logistics of an army at war leaves emerge two diametrically opposed views: the Superintendency everything worked well, implying that the claim is valid, consistent with the circumstances; for the troops it hardly appeared acceptable, implying that the impact of circumstances must not fall on those fights. The events of 1942 do not escape the general rule: the trend, high-level, to present things as more than satisfactory; rancorous critically low level, for the hardships suffered in almost all service sectors, especially from June onwards. It is easy to understand how both sides are right and wrong together. No logistic organization possible without autonomy

conferred and transport connections assigned to it. Any failure in these fields has an effect on the unit and, what is worse, in differing degrees, so inevitably units of the front line or in poor conditions are the worst served, while the favorites to reports of distance or ease of communication will better fed. Which will cause bitter confrontations and harsh protests.

As a result, the Comando Superiore first and then Delease, being to administer what arrived from the motherland and not much exists in Libya, could assert that the Superintendency N.A. had as practically possible, and on the other hand, the divisions in the line and had many good reasons for recrimination.

Who was fighting just imported the reasons why the bakery was poorly made and the bread was often too moldy and largely inedible on distribution; or because the fresh or frozen meat was so rarely granted and often, on arrival, were to be buried in the battered; or because cloth uniforms and leather footwear should prove so poor as to have a life vastly inferior to that provided to the tables of the Commissariat. Of course the question footwear constituted for the infantryman a daily tragedy. *"Truly pitiful and painful – Gen. Scotti wrote in his report, commander of the Trento - was to see people forced to march about the infamous land of Marmarica and Egypt fit as beggars or even barefoot."* Fortunately, at least ... the enemy came to meet us, to abandon Tobruk and Matruh large quantities of good sturdy and resistant shoes.

Logistical organization of the theater rests its functionality on three pillars: staff assigned to various services, supplies and transportation. For staff is sufficient to note that on October 26 Delease urged sending from Italy a good 277 noncommissioned officers and 3,093 troops (two thirds of which were considered urgent need) to *fill the organic defects* of the Intendenza.

For the stocks, it is appropriate to refer to the end of June. At that time in Rome they were doing the accounts to achieve the desired autonomy of two months in N.A.. It was necessary extraordinary assignment, ie more than 40,000 tons. monthly supplies ordinary, of 830,000 tons., divided as follows:

|                      |          |
|----------------------|----------|
| health materials     | 99 tons. |
| food for nationals   | 11,150 “ |
| food for the Germans | 3,200 “  |



|                        |          |
|------------------------|----------|
| clothing and equipment | 150 “    |
| munitions              | 30,000 " |
| engineer materials     | 20,000 " |
| fuels                  | 17,300 " |
| automotive materials   | 1,000 “  |
| chemical service       | 200 "    |

The examination made by SMRE about the possibility to fulfill the need, subject to availability and sharing materials in extraordinary allocations monthly, was made considering the period from July to December 1942, and immediately took a first cut in the field of ammunition . He wanted to get to 10 *unfoc* for machine guns, mortars and cannons accompanying 14 *unfoc* for field artillery and anti-aircraft and 13 *unfoc* for heavy field and heavy, but these levels were almost halved: would be sent by the year only 16,000 tons of the 30,000 needed. A second cut about the materials of engineers: 10,600 tons instead of the 20,000 needed.

That said, the ammunition and food supplies were shipped to monthly rates while other materials could be immediately made available to the Superiore Transport Directorate, which would cure the flow to ports of embarkation as they had presented the possibility load. Except that "*according to recent forecasts made by the Superiore Transportation management is possible that by December may be realized for the entire program of extraordinary transport of 60,000 tons,*" which program "*in the most favorable*" could be insured for just 25,000 tons. In other words, instead of amassing stocks for two months would not have exceeded the 18 days!

Also the demand for 83,000 tons of supplies overtime forwarded to the Intendenza N.A. presumably was based on data of the average value, ie not taking into account consumption for large battles (which would be provided *at the rear*, restoring levels with ordinary supplies). And yet, by the Central Authority already unsatisfactory reception of requests was considered acquitted at *embarkation*, apart from almost safe to partial losses of sinking ships. All this would have been bearable if at least the ordinary supplies were adequate and assured results. Instead of the 40,000 tons. monthly not only they showed themselves altogether inadequate, but neglected is the unavailability, already established, ammunition and materials of engineers, is the sinking of merchant.

To conclude: the calculations were made *in the most favorable hypothesis* (no harm), without considering the *worst-case scenario* (very bad). Of course it was the latter that occurred.

Finally when the vehicle drama is well known that it would not be worth mentioning. But there is also a reason to doubt that makes full use of even limited availability. We refer, for example, to the recovery and repair of the means and materials, activities that agree testimonies considered performed well below what is required by the circumstances and that even a personal intervention of Cavallero could greatly improve, despite their obvious importance. True it is that even in this most of the responsibility falls on a central authority. It deserves mention the story of two plants of the Intendenza requested by the Comando Superiore in October 1941, namely a workshop for the army park and a workshop for the engineers. To meet the demand needed prepare emergency machinery and equipment as well as personnel. In late December, the General Directorate of Motor Vehicles had provided materials, drawing them almost all from its stores, while the General Directorate Civilian Personnel and General Affairs, interested now to recruit 300 specialized civilian workers, informing the employment of just 12 workers. The Higher Technical Service Department of Motor Vehicles, in turn, requested, he introduced the absolute impossibility of finding qualified military personnel. Consequently, the Department of Motor Superior turned to SMRE (Army General Staff) stating that everything was still and that therefore it was necessary to draw the military mechanical motorists from un-motorized units, wherever located and / or revoke the exemption mechanics of civilian establishments from classes young people, who would be replaced automatically by elderly elements.

In *late February 1942*, machinery and equipment of the two factories of Intendenza were still provisioned at Piacenza, while the question of the staff had made a small, and not decisive, step forward: requirement limited to 186 specialized civilian workers (120 for the Park workshop and 66 a workshop for engineers), availability of 66 workers (39 military and 27 civilians). In contrast to Libya some 3,000 vehicles lay waiting for major repairs.

In *the second half of July*, the staff predicted was finally sent to Tripoli, where most of the 27 civilian workers turned out poor level work. Meanwhile, by the installation of two facilities the original had passed the decision to include them in a car repair workshop park (OPRA) a technical-industrial, detached

of the Intendenza N.A. and reports directly to the General Directorate of Motor Vehicles. The monthly revenue of repairs should be about 200-250 vehicles in the first two months of operation, and then reach the 400-500 overhaul as well as a significant number of the total.

On *19 September* the S.M.R.E. He ordered the concentration in Piacenza -where were still houses the equipment of the two famous laboratories -of 169 military, specifically referred to. *October 16* was issued a second list of 110 other soldiers to be transferred to Piacenza within the month.<sup>(12)</sup>

Drawbacks of this kind is found course also in other sectors, so that it is difficult to disassemble the criticisms made by Kesselring to our systems and rhythms of organization and work in the midst of war.

As concerned the services of large units, deficiencies in almost all areas had led to "centralization" which, although acceptable in theory, became questionable when it translated in removing almost all the divisions and even the corps, which also they had to ring up the supply chain. The role of the army corps was covered in some way, by the delegation of Intendenza n. 3. Now, to transport the measure was intended to keep the divisions perpetually in crisis. Furthermore it resulted in the Germans a strong distrust of Deleese. The Germanic system generally result was to leave the large units the means necessary to their needs and concentrate only exuberance. Little wonder, then, that the ACIT Command, in comparing the availability of the two Intendenze, reaches the conclusion that the Italian side was ... much richer than the German.

Let us now turn to supplies from Italy during the period January-October 1942, based on data provided by SMRE -Office Order on January 31, 1943. The civil and military ships (including landing craft) and planes used to transport personnel and materials to North Africa are the table on the next page.

As is easy to see that the surge in shipments from the mother country took place in July, but it is worth pointing out that this did not depend on the availability of the port of Tobruk, because in that month touched Tobruk only a few tankers, submarines and some few ships carrying German personnel. Hitting the lowest level of shipments by sea in the first half, so much so that to share the criticism of many who attributed much of the responsibility for the disaster

| The transport for N.A.  |          |          |          |   |
|---|----------|----------|----------|---|
| month   | Ships    |          | Aircraft | events  |
|   | departed | lost (*) |          |   |
| January   | 28       | 1        | 294      | Italian – German offensive                                      |
| February  | 14       | 1        | 240      |   |
| March   | 23       | 3        | 436      | (neutralization of Malta  |
| April   | 41       | 2        | 454      |   |
| May   | 33       | 2        | 256      | battle of Ain el-Gazala   |
| June  | 18       | 2        | 313      | naval battle  |
| July  | 81       | 2        | 810      | the 1st battle of El Alamein                                    |
| August  | 57       | 4        | 821      | 2 <sup>nd</sup> battle of El Alamein<br>naval battle            |
| September   | 49       | 7        | 683      | preparation   |
| October   | 44       | 10       | 929      | 3 <sup>rd</sup> battle of El Alamein<br>neutralization of Malta |
| Total   | 388      | 34       | 5,236    |   |
| (*) All civilians there but some slight discrepancy with the figures of Supermarina |          |          |          |   |

El Alamein failure to concentration of all energy to send to Africa, when it was possible, a much greater number of ships. The prosecution, of course, involves the organizational and executive of several areas in the center and on the outskirts, in departing and arriving; and does not obviate the unfortunate decision to bring the CSIR to the level of armed, with all the consequent logistical burdens.

According to the Gen. Giglioli, head of the G.S. of Superlibia, the important thing was to land in Africa men and materials at any port or airport, although far from Egypt. Fuel consumption for transport in the area of employment was not equal to the damage the loss of a ship and its cargo. Having wanted to send ships to Tobruk from July to October was costly in ships sunk or damaged and in materials lost. *"You took advantage - he wrote -how could have been certain periods of low enemy activity against our sea traffic to be adequate autonomy in Africa"*<sup>(13)</sup>.

Needless comparison with supplies flowed to Alexander, partly because rather humiliating for us. May look respectable 4,000 vehicles landed in Libya given our conditions, but what about in front of 71,000 trucks arrived in the Middle East between January and September 1942? And what can represent 370 field pieces against some 6,000 sent from Britain and the United States? And the 850 tanks against the 2500 Anglo-American, always neglecting the arrival of the month of October?

\*- of the three armed forces and including 4,783 civilians.

For other types of materials you have the following figures:

|                        |        |                 |               |
|------------------------|--------|-----------------|---------------|
| medical supplies:      | arrive | 1,237 tons      | of 1,252;     |
| material Commissioner: | "      | 102,812         | of 104,808;   |
| automotive parts       | "      | 4,393           | of 4,710;     |
| engineer material:     | "      | 29,558          | of 29,880;    |
| artillery projectiles  | "      | 6,774,800 shots | of 6,809,300. |

To complement the information given, it should be added that shipments had absorbed substantial percentage of *national output this year*.<sup>(14)</sup>, For example:

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| guns of 20 mm. | 50%   |
| guns of 47/32, | 82%   |
| field pieces   | more than equivalent to a production of 50% |
|                | taken from stocks                           |

|                     |     |
|---------------------|-----|
| heavy field pieces. | 35% |
| Anti-aircraft guns  | 78% |
| Vehicles            | 52% |
| Tanks               | 81% |

As for the fuel they are shipped 109,293 tons in the first ten months., Of which 99,386 are arriving in North Africa. But keep in mind that the transport type influenced significantly on the actual tonnage. A tanker of 10,000 tons in scope had or could have actually 10,000 tons of fuel, while a cargo ship of equal magnitude it went in drums only 4,000. It added that to 1,000 tons bulk fuel needed 7,000 barrels, of 350 tons of iron. So the obvious opportunity to resort to oil tankers. Except that the tanker is not only represented an easier target for the enemy, but also it needed adequate tanks at the discharge port, which directly deliver the fuel to the maximum permitted speed pumps (150-250 tons/hour depending on the type of fuel). In our case the small tankers were in Benghazi and Tobruk equipment extremely reduced, whereby the discharge -with makeshift means -it was very slow and part of the fuel was lost. The only port really equipped in this respect was Tripoli, where the possibilities for storage reached 40,000 tons. So much for foresight and strategic logistics!

Faced with sinking and the damage to the merchant was the reality of an insufficient shipbuilding business. Kesselring he attributed the blame on several factors, including inadequate allocation of raw materials and spare parts to construction sites; pace of work still remained equal to the time of peace; unwillingness of the owners, who tended rather to keep its ships from the war. But in this regard, there is an interesting memorandum presented to Cavallero August 5 from *Achille Lauro* and *Angelo Costa*, on behalf of the Italian owners. The memorandum tended to seek a solution to two problems of equal urgency and importance: the best use of old tonnage and the reconstruction of the lost one.

First argument. First calling for the abolition of certain safety standards, essentially translating it in load reduced to two-thirds (in 1941 in half) of the maximum capacity that the ship remained afloat although possibly damaged with extensive flooding and, at worst, We lose a smaller amount of material. Against this measure the memorandum opposed that, leaving margins even modest load, was exposed to risk a greater percentage of ships. Persuaded by the argument, Cavallero ordered that the cargo was immediately increased to 90% or, for motor vehicles, fuel and ammunition, to the maximum possible<sup>(15)</sup>.

Followed the serious problem of the periodic review of the ships in

service. Since the war no merchant had never had the normal turn of repair and maintenance, because all continuously used. It was obvious that the age and wear it would soon limited the speed, with obvious increased risk, and then blocked the use. Even more complex was the prompt repair of damaged ships. It was to equip the ports, where it could be completely repaired, tugs for the rapid transfer of the ship in port; to widen their range of ports equipped with the facilities for the most urgent repairs, particularly in Puglia; to avoid work overload in some ports and contemporary empty in others, as sometimes occurred. In other words there was much to be reviewed and a lot to prepare.

As for the reconstruction of the lost ships, ship owners manifested strong opposition vessels having average speed and modest included in the program Host-Venturi, namely in the new program of the merchant navy war for 1943 set by the Inspectorate for shipbuilding merchant and for shipyards <sup>(16)</sup>:

|                   |                                  |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|
| 10 tankers        | 9,000 tons. d.w., speed 14 knots |
| 18 cargo steamers | 4,000 tons. d.w., speed 14 knots |
| 8 cargo ships     | 2,000 tons. d.w., speed 12 knots |
| 19 cargo ships    | 750 tons. d.w., speed 9 knots    |
| 12 cargo ships    | 650 tons. d.w., speed 9 knots    |

These features appeared unsatisfactory, especially for speed. Without coming to a comparison of a technical nature, which, moreover, would lead to consider the advantages and disadvantages of each solution with a subjective choice, it can be observed that Germany seemed to give some credit to such kind of ships, having ordered to Italian shipyards twelve cargo ships of 5,000 tons deadweight and about 12 knots, on their own designs.

The memorandum undoubtedly took into account the interests of shipowners, but also put light on some aspects unfortunately typical of the Italian State. First, the State could, under the laws in force, commandeer or rent a boat. In the case of the requisition fair compensation for the loss it was equal to 100% of the assessment; in the other case ... 60-70%. Second: after two years of war the owners did not receive compensation for their losses were known yet the tax assessment; moreover, increasing the owner's credit, the Ministry of Finance had decreed ... the hang of this credit. Third: the entry into the field of Italy, 212 Italian ships, nearly a third of the merchant fleet, were surprised around the world; consequently

most of them had found a refuge and internment in neutral ports, others had been captured. However, the government was running out to sell the ships interned with other governments with the owners knowing nothing or having received compensation, despite the costs incurred in the meantime.

Practically every aspect of overseas supplies touched keys mourners. In the ports of departure occurred deficiencies of various kinds. The loading of cargo in Italy and even more so in Greece required an inordinate amount of time because the materials rarely had been promptly prepared for or local dysfunction. In July, no merchant was able to make *two* trips to Libya. Large cargo ships arrived in Brindisi the 6 that month resumed the sea after 14 days (*Pilo*), 17 days (*Pisani*) and even 28 days (*Sestriere*).

In the ports of arrival the drawbacks typically tied to the inadequacies port: Benghazi did not exceed 1,500 tons daily, Tobruk barely reached 1,000 tons and Marsa Matruh 300 tons (when it could run). At this bottleneck, well-known, they were added excessive downtime in port operations, fuel storage limitations, shortage of manpower, inadequate anti-aircraft defense.

The organization of escort had aroused controversy, but only in September, after reporting of Gen. Geloso about his frequent trips to empty fighter base in Greece, due to the failure to timely reporting of changes of direction and times of the convoys, as well as after the intervention of Kesselring, the Comando Supremo decided to set up two organs of coordinators: the already mentioned Committee for escort and Joint naval and aeronautical Committee, intended to regulate the matter.

When it became clear the feeling that the amount of supplies from the motherland had not adapted to the need of the hour and of the ACIT, it came to the exploitation of warships. The suggestion of the German side, started from two premises both doubt that the failure of the stream was essentially caused by the offensive and that British warships could carry out the task of transporting materials effectively. The small quantities taken in Africa by destroyers and submarines leave uncertain about the real utility of the war fleet diverted from its normal duties.

Summing up and repeats, in spite of considerable efforts made by the Comando Supremo and the General Staff of the armed forces, you can not leave the topic of logistics and war economy without a strong dissatisfaction. Kesselring, yet he became interested



the issue and had several opportunities to discuss with Cavallero and, later, with the Gen. Ambrosio. Eventually declare himself convinced the insufficient use of the war potential, the poor organization of war production, the defective set of problems. The comments are crude, but not very far from the truth. There are extenuating circumstances, but there are also completely error free and nothing justified, and not always the right men were put in the right places.

### 3. THE ACTION OF COMMAND

On the following pages provides the plans of the organization summaries of Axis forces officers in Africa, northern (n. 1), the Italian Air Force in N.A. (N. 2) and of the German forces operating in the Mediterranean (n. 3) as of September 1942.

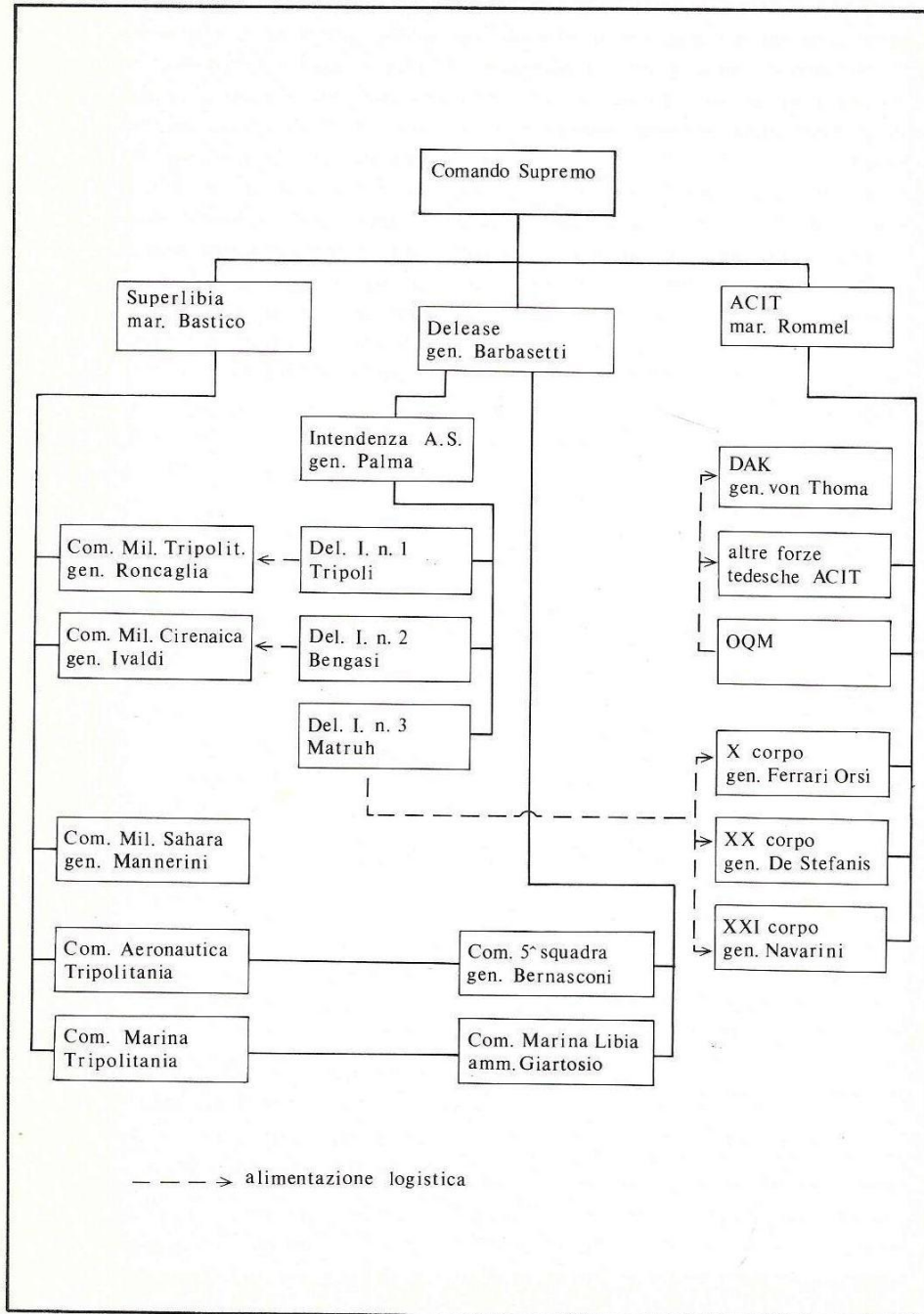
Hits in the first of them the largest defect that can exist in a theater of operations and in a theater: the absence of the unit of command. If until August 1942 Bastico had all the levers in hand, despite the interference of the Comando Supremo and the OKW called into the issue by Rommel as it suited him, and the staffs of the armed forces, the establishment of Deleuse meant the break of balance. It is useless to consider the history of the order, literally imposed by Cavallero for personal reasons, but it's obvious operating discomfort of Superlibia and of the ACIT, both lacking logistical apparatus and the direct aid of the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Fleet and ships of the Royal Marina.

It is true that until the summer had witnessed the gradual increase of ostentation of independence of Rommel, so Cavallero found himself having to intervene sometimes almost more as a peacemaker than of Chief of Staff Generally, however Deleuse with the greater autonomy granted to Rommel virtually found a sharper edge in logistics.

In part, however, the kind of "flexible coupling" wanted by Cavallero, it is believed that in the field of command a big mistake has been made on the formation of *Panzergruppe*, not creating an Italian-German Operational Command. It would save the jealous principle of a theater of operations in the hands of Italian, as recognized also from the OKW logical, and while it would be much better harmonized components allies in the great strategic unit in charge

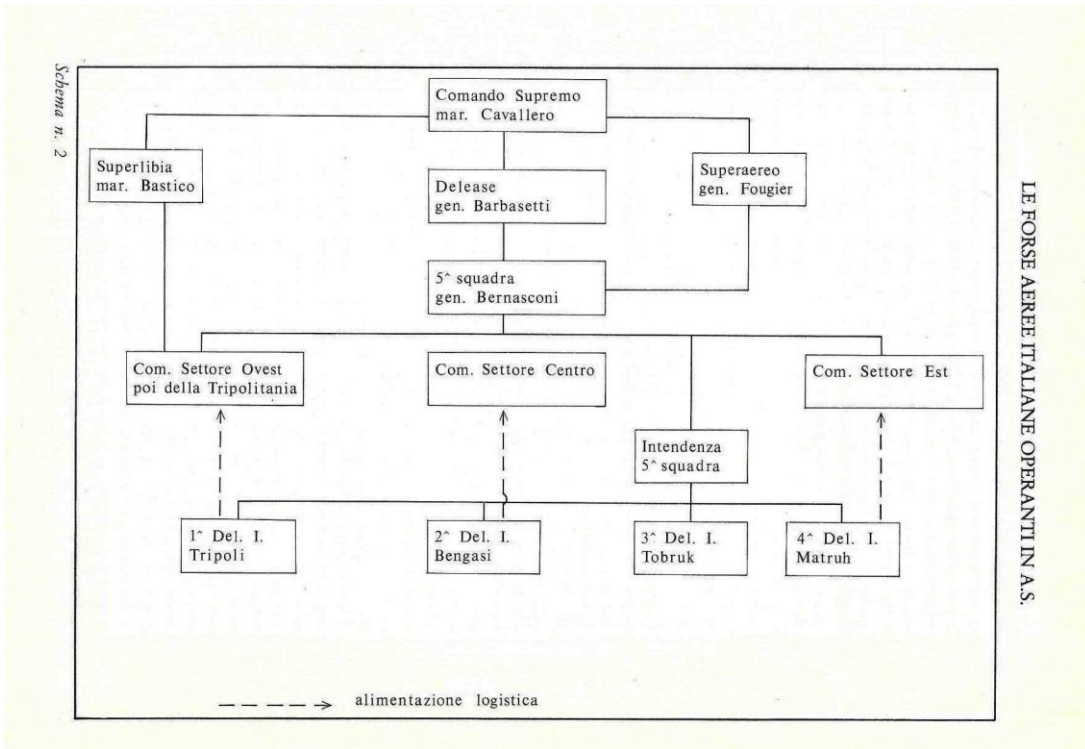
THE ITALIAN-GERMAN FORCES OPERATING IN N.A.

LE FORZE ITALO-TEDESCHE OPERANTI IN A.S.



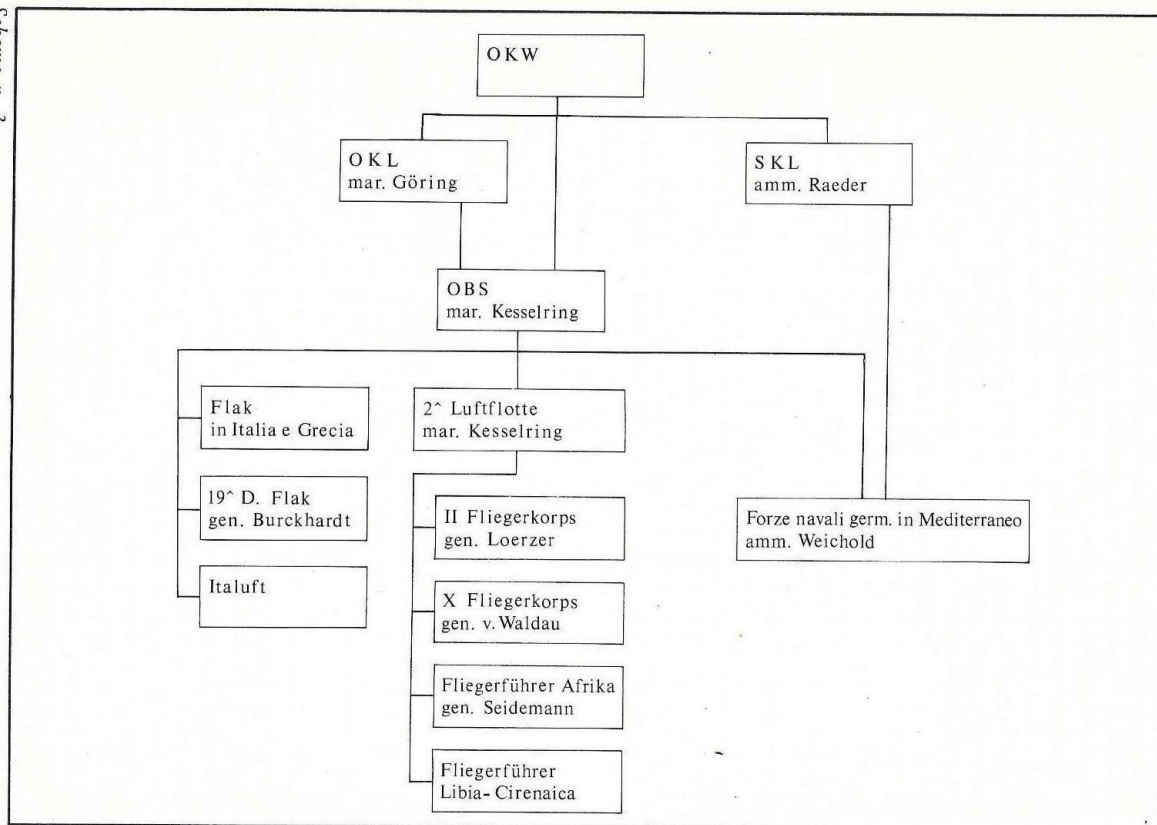
Schema n. 1

THE ITALIAN-GERMAN FORCES OPERATING IN N.A.



THE ITALIAN-GERMAN FORCES OPERATING IN N.A.

Schema n. 3



to conduct the war in Libya and Egypt. Presumably many drawbacks would be attenuated and the crisis of El Alamein the dissemination of the orders would not have been fatal omissions and negligence. Also, let us say, less incisive would have appeared in the eyes of the opponent and posterity German influence, while recognizing willingly to DAK each title tactical dominance net for strength, efficiency and value.

It has been said and shown that the relationship between Rommel and Italian high level commands (Comando Supremo and the Comando Superiore) are not classified as idyllic. It is also quietly admitted that Rommel, from his point of view, had more than one reason for recrimination valid: Italian units equipped and inadequately armed to the war in the desert and the modern warfare in general, the average training level of the cadres and troops did not rise to the occasion, the flow of supplies and evictions insufficient to the task. From this, however, to argue that:

" (...) Italian leaders, who were beginning to kick in secret under the German yoke and were consumed by the fact that Rommel had realized more with a single Germany armored division (later two) than they had been able to do their overall and on that front they had available more than 200,000 men, they tried a malicious pleasure to put a spoke in the wheels " <sup>(17)</sup>,

and he runs highly. This, incidentally, gives a pretty good idea of the balance with which many war are reconstructed. It would be like saying, for example, that the commanders of the army corps of Ritchie, whose attitude of disapproval if not frond against their boss is established (on British sources agree), have deliberately left to drift the tide of battle of Ain el-Gazala.

Rather deserves emphasis, because formulated by many commanders, the poor presence of Mar. Bastico first and then Gen. Barbasetti, between units at the front. Like others, Gen. Scotti, commander of *Trento*, did not hesitate to point out the sad feeling caused " *by the work of Supercomando Libya for the long distance has always maintained by the troops operating, giving the impression of absenteeism and a complete submissiveness to the conduct of operations themselves from Colonel General, later Field Marshal Rommel* " <sup>(18)</sup>.

On the relationship between Italians and Germans do it is to confirm that described above: a certain coldness at a high level, the common good camaraderie low level, in all cases mentality

very different. He played also against the Italian lower operating capacity of the unit, due to the now very well known shortcomings of the bottom. In this regard it seems opportune to focus very well the meaning of a judgment that could be -and was - wrongly interpreted.

As I mentioned above emerges unanimous observation of all the commanders of corps, division and regiment about the deficiencies of most professional cadres of the military reserve. In a general sense of distrust it characterized the action of many senior officers: the absence of technical basis in fact, they did not feel able to dominate with security and influence the events and instances of combat. Too many were those who gave way physically or psychologically to the hardships and privations and inevitable, therefore, was the uncertainty of the troops before the abandonment of the command post for physical reasons or nerve. As for junior officers, the trailers which were maintained within certain limits, while experiencing the non-compliance of the preparation provided by the A.U.C. schools or insufficient performance of recalls temporary. Of course, in front of the flaws they were eliminated or reduced without great difficulty by the young officers, because the freshest of basics, more responsive and less burdened by the degree.

A framework so traced -and mainly the infantry -not seem exaggerated and reflected on various fronts, of course with all the many exceptions. However, it has led to some strange and violent condemnations can not be denied in the light of the considerable perplexity.

"(...) The infamous ranking, systematic, and the silence imposed by the interests of the military caste that in all relationships, in all relationships of our staff we tend to justify generals and colonels and download the burden on "military reserve", the "bourgeois" called to arms" <sup>(19)</sup>.

From the time of Julius Caesar the criticism against a poorly trained units have always been charged to the unit commander himself and not the subordinates. So it seems obvious that, were encountered certain technical deficiencies in the mass of the officers or NCOs of the military reserve, the responsibility should be automatically attributed to the system of recruitment or instruction organization or both and *never* to the aforementioned mass. And when you complain the bad exercise of command by many that by platoon commanders in the World War are seen projected at the head of a battalion in the war, after twenty years of work in any

peaceful civil profession, the reproach is clearly not moved to the parties concerned, which among other things probably would have remained very happy at home, but at the top ministerial. Added that at no commander has ever escaped the understandable sense of bitterness, of despair and resentment towards establishing military officer recalled and placed in a position for which you do not hear properly educated. Even the poor attitude to the command can not be charged to the individual: the selection has obviously done evil.

In any army it is axiomatic that military preparedness is the responsibility and competence of the institution in the selection and organization of instruction, and individual unit commanders in the next training. Not for nothing Montgomery, having at first glance judged so poor the training level of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army to prevent him from sending the divisions to the attack, he told everyone so that there were no doubts about the manager and began with replacing some high level commanders. Basically, the attribute to personal interests or caste assessments because, rather than result from polemic would seem to indicate, at the very least, superficial knowledge of the subject.

#### 4. EPILOGUE

In 1942 saw the Italian and German divisions from el-Agheila, arrive at El Alamein after a vivid sequence of victories and abandon forever Egypt and hope to reach the Suez Canal, an impossible goal.

Known combinations made with the First World War: El Alamein I is the Piave 1917 as El Alamein II is the Piave 1918 as El Alamein III is Vittorio Veneto. The decisive role is up to the two intermediate battles: one called *the solstice* and that of Alam el Halfa. In both cases the attack, winner at Caporetto and Ain el Gazala- Tobruk and reorganized after the setback imposed upon him by a defender with his back to the wall, again to achieve the breakthrough of the last obstacle and must recognize the inadequacy of his forces. The third time (El Alamein III and Vittorio Veneto) is not superfluous, but it is the logical conclusion of the game, on the military, political and psychological.

The British 8<sup>th</sup> Army could rightfully be proud of the victory, regardless of the weight of the factors in its favor, but the ACIT resist with stubborn tenacity up to the extreme limit of human strength. After twelve days of bitter fighting, the number of prisoners of the Axis was still small. It will rise rapidly only from

from 3 November and it will reach in a few days about 35,000 men. At about how the ACIT had captured in twenty-four hours in Tobruk, four months earlier. A note of British source is probably the best comment on the desperate struggle sustained by the Italian - German Army: "*It's almost unbelievable how the defense had been able to withstand so anointed*" <sup>(20)</sup>

## NOTES TO CHAPTER ELEVEN

- 1) From the diary of Cavallero, date 10/20/1942.
- 2) M. GABRIEL, op. cited above, p. 288.
- 3) E. ROMMEL, op. cited above, p. 127.
- 4) Ibid, p. 171.
- 5) Report of Gen. Navarini April 1943.
- 6) Benito Mussolini, *Storia di un anno*, Mondadori, Milan, 1944, p. 9.
- 7) K. ASSMANN, op. cited above, p. 272.
- 8) Rommel knew that the OKW had equipped for the African environment the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> *Panzerdivision* and probably believed he would be receiving them. Instead, later, the 7<sup>th</sup> Division was sent to Russia.
- 9) H. ALEXANDER, *Memoirs* cit., P. 43.
- 10) B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs* cit., P. 139. This brings to mind the replies that Wellington gave to Creevey, a member of Parliament who had followed him to Brussels and congratulated for the victory of Waterloo: "*God dam, I do not think that I would win if I had been there.*"
- 11) H. ALEXANDER, *Memoirs* cit., P. 43
- 12) Note that at the end of October 1942 Deleuse urged the SMRE -Office services in Africa to send 586 tons of spare parts, 620 tons of factory machinery and other materials of the SATA, a company that worked only for the N.A. Intendenza, lying in Naples waiting to load for some months (Deleuse Historical Diary, f. 214 date 10/20/1942).
- 13) Report of Gen. Giglioli on 04/16/1943.
- 14) The percentages are considered guidance because actually calculated on the basis of shipments made throughout 1942, ie including the months of November and December, which instead were excluded from our data.
- 15) Did not manage to know who had given the order not to fully utilize the opportunity to load. Presumably the Directorate Superior Transportation. But the curious thing is that the Libyan ports has been identified, and complained about this negative characteristic, but without it be a result of a specific order, so much so that to attribute the fact to neglect the port of loading or unavailability of materials at the start.
- 16) The program recorded on the memorial for Cavallero does not coincide with that indicated by Favagrossa (op. Cited above, p. 181). However, neither of them goes through.
- 17) DAVID CHANDLER, *La battaglia di Ain el Gazala*, in *Storia della seconda guerra mondiale*, Rizzoli and Purnell, vol II. Milano 1967, p. 139.
- 18) Report of Gen. Scotti on 05/21/1943.
- 19) GIORGIO BOCCA, *Storia d'Italia nella guerra fascista 1940-1943*, Laterza, Bari 1969 p. 322.  
The speech comes from a thought of Rommel, who was judged "*good officers of the army reserve the effective and discreet.*" Not that it's very important, but regardless of the poor reliability of a technical comparison given the inconsistency of terms, such speech does not appear in "The Rommel Papers."
- 20) B. LIDDELL HART, *Storia militare della seconda guerra mondiale* cit., P. 425.



ATTACHED DOCUMENTS

SUPREME COMMAND  
1<sup>st</sup> UNIT – OPERATIONS OFFICE  
AFRICA THEATER

OPERATIONS IN N.A.

The tactical situation became unsustainable around Tobruk and the Ain Gazala line facing the enemy, under pressure we had to decide a retreat a considerable distance from Marmarica in order to:

- do not wear down our troops further, given that the same should *apply* for the defense of Tripolitania;
- approach to our bases gaining time to allow influx of reinforcements and accessories and give way to reorganize the units try;
- remove the enemy from his bases placing him in logistical difficulties such as to reduce, if not stop his, offensive thrust.

Geographic characteristics do not allow to lay the line on the *Gebel*, where also a Cyrenaica anywhere could be circumvented for leaders alleging at Ajdabiya. Could be chosen in Syrtica position Agheila-Marada and the Sirte-Hon. For the reasons already exposed in other memorandum, the first is affordable (cheapest naturally tactically of land and extension opposite; excellent starting platform offensive towards the Cyrenaica; permitting good air safety at the port of Tripoli and effective our actions on Benghazi).

Desired position on Agheila-Marada was the reorganization of our German and large units, with priority to the mechanized divisions.

On January 20 the Italian-German mobile divisions had so regained a good efficiency (total 200 axis tanks in line, another thirty already landed, div. «*Trieste*» almost to number), whereas for the infantry divisions had managed to reorganize the only infantry (artillery materials for divisions began landings over the sea with the convoy arrived in Tripoli on the 24<sup>th</sup>).

It follows from all of the information appeared that the enemy-dropped the front of Sollum -was preparing to bring the bulk of his forces against our Syrtica position, before which he had meanwhile made fresh forces close (1<sup>st</sup> rifles Bd. and 2nd Armor Bd.), who had already made contact with our troops. All news attributed to the enemy's intention to resume the attack a short deadline. However, multiple sources had confirmed that the enemy was still in serious logistical difficulties.

In order to take advantage of the temporary superiority of our mobile forces on enemy contact ones (the forces freed from the forehead of Sollum were still distant and had just started moving towards the West-fall Halfaya: 17 January) with Gen. Rommel, agree with General Bastico, decided to attack on 21<sup>st</sup> with the *mobile forces* to upset preparations to attack opponents and inflict losses that would have postponed the start of its offensive revival.

The attack began on the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Enemy forces in contact (200<sup>th</sup> Guards Br.; 1<sup>st</sup> rifle Bd., 7<sup>th</sup> Fusiliers Br.) you are subtracted rapidly retreating in the direction of Ajdabiya.

The day on Jan. 22. Rommel has chased to prevent enemy forces mass on Ajdabiya and separating it from Balbia, so as to achieve further that success that had not been able to achieve in our positions. 23<sup>rd</sup> on a significant part of enemy forces (parts of the 200<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade and 1<sup>st</sup> Rifle, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Bd., already in second row) was in fact East of Ajdabiya threatened to bypass.

Since the evening of 22<sup>nd</sup> Jan. Rommel had ordered also to the XXI and X Corps to leave the positions to move into Ajdabiya.

The evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> tactical situation was undoubtedly favorable (large parts of enemy forces detached from Balbia and threatened to bypass): in fact, however, had not yet achieved even partly meant to beat parts of the enemy forces.

It was also necessary that Supercomando and the Comando Supremo to speak with directives intended to frame the ongoing tactical action within the framework of the General conduct of operations in Libya. Lying at the head of the G.S. General was logical that such directives were described by him.

It was to be examined in relation to the tactical situation created in Ajdabiya, if such a move would secure business even recapture of Cyrenaica, or keep in the concept which had begun the action and that is to beat the enemy forces, parts reorganize then in position of strength.

The question had to be decided according to the following considerations:

-the enemy appeared weaker than had been thought, essentially

the confirmed its crisis logistics (distance of Alexandria and Tobruk); though it was shown-until the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup>-very mobile and maneuverable, so as to be able to escape the attack of our forces: in fact no enemy to rate some importance had been beaten again;

-the Italian X and XXI Corps were still at the beginning of their reorganization, with the divisions still almost no mobile artillery (1), and especially absolutely no means of transport: in case of movement could move on foot, without even the means to transport their weapons;

-the few available vehicles at the Italian Intendenza were all absorbed by supplies from Tripoli to Ajdabiya, and insufficient to ensure such supplies in action: a fact of such vehicles parts had been retained by General Rommel to ensure transport to Ajdabiya, and already expected would have achieved considerable difficulties for warehouse supplies of Agheila in the days following: specifically fuel requests made by C.A.M. had already exhausted all stocks of Agheila;

-did not appear so can move forward of X and XXI Corps, and logistical difficulties, it is provided that, in the face of the enemy's offensive rebound, would not have been possible to restore the Corps on the positions of Agheila.

In such a situation was therefore at the very least premature to move the troops by foot to Ajdabiya, and even making abstraction from the logistical difficulties, think of a reconquest of Cyrenaica before he beat the enemy forces. Was logical

(1) Div. *Brescia*: two bns.; Div. *Bologna*: two bns.; Div. *Pavia*: three bns.; Div. *Trento*: three bns. All media are very low and towing and transport and without R.M.V.

instead allow, despite consumption and losses that it would import, to insist with mobile forces to search, to the East or North of Ajdabiya, that success that had not managed to achieve closer to our positions.

Looking to the future, the further conduct of operations (possible continuation of the advance) was to be expected, depending on both the measure of success that would have been earned (amount of casualties inflicted on the enemy, especially tanks) and general logistics capabilities of the theater.

Now seemed clear since the evening of the 23<sup>rd</sup> that the enemy was driven out of the ground, saving their forces rather than to commit to defend this or that line: the total annihilation of enemy forces was therefore certainly be excluded. On the other hand, the overall situation of the Mediterranean and of the possibilities of our power of Libya did not appear, for the near future welcome: as is well known, especially as a result of the fuel shortage is to predict a drop in maritime transport to allow just the power of our forces, without thinking it needs reinforcements requested from a long cycle of active operations.

In General, then, for the purposes of the conduct of the war in the Mediterranean, it was appropriate to think of a reconquest of Cyrenaica before the overall situation we would build on the success to the Nile to achieve decisive goals? The reconquest of Cyrenaica, military purposes, has value only if it is an act of the next advance towards the channel. For the political repercussions can be prosecuted if you are sure to keep possession.

But a recovery in the current situation is a weakening of our situation in Libya: the facts have now proved virtually as the conquest of Cyrenaica, from one to the other side, given the geographical location, is a short-term operating cycle. And then you can always retake Cyrenaica. And it is always possible-when the situation permits-moving towards the Canal is starting from Syrtica as starting from the Marmarica. By pulling the Syrtica we re-organizing conditions and feed our forces, and we dismissed the enemy from its foundations placing it in crisis logistics: we obtained the superiority that in Marmarica the enemy had.

Remaining in Syrtica, in terms more favorable to us and more unfavorable for the enemy, there will be easier to prepare the instrument that will enable us, when the situation allows, to retake Cyrenaica to definitely keep it or to proceed at the same time towards the Canal. It should also be considered that, by remaining in Syrtica, extending the coast to defend the landing attempts by the dreaded enemy is below, and it should be continuously increasing advancing instead into Cirenaica.

Based on these considerations were given to General Bastico and Rommel the directives attached to, which essentially States that the position of resistance must remain on Agheila-Marada and that-when the situation makes it possible to do so profitably-mobile forces to operate offensively in the South of Benghazi with Center of gravity at Ajdabiya.

The directives include the explicit subject to be changed in relation to developments in the situation, and this expectation that the opponent might possibly, in the short term, be so weakened (for losses or removal of power from the theater to meet other operational requirements) we exclude any possible offensive forces in return. In this case the Cyrenaica might-for political reasons and to ensure better living conditions for our troops-

be retaken because the same troops logistics supply would be far less burdensome (not being a battle for food) and could therefore be ensured even if our line of communication will be lengthened considerably.

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA

COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMIES IN NORTH AFRICA  
STAFF

Minutes of the meeting held on January 27, 1942 from 12:00 hours to 13:00 hours at the headquarters of the Army command «Afrika» (5 km West Ajdabiya).

Present

|                              |                           |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| -Ecc. Gen. Gambarà;          | -Gen Rommel,              |
| -Ecc. Gen. Marchesi;         | -Leut. Col. Westphal;     |
| -Ecc. Gen. Calvi di Bergolo; | -Leut. Col. Heggenreiner; |
| -Leut. Col. Ravajoli;        | -Major. Mellenthin.       |
| -Leut. Col. Sackey;          |                           |
| -Major. Saleh;               |                           |

*Rommel.* The situation is favorable; We are occupying the area from the sea with Antelat C.A.M., 90th «Afrika» and «Sabratha». C.T.A. to Msus and raking to retrieve all the tanks and materials abandoned by the enemy and bring them into the area of collection. Tomorrow will be another small action which will also be the C.A.M. According to his desire.

I'm going to leave the forces behind the front lines and hit the enemy if you will see; but I don't think it will show. It has already lost about 300 tanks and armored cars, including 120 artillery pieces and many materials and food; few men given the speed of the means at its disposal.

*Gambarà.* It is the desire of the Duce that X and XXI Corps are kept on current positions and proceed to their re-organization and training.

*Rommel.* The enemy now can't attack. All the captured tanks, including inefficient ones will be employed with two men in as forts. The bulk of the troops will be able to rest in preparation for future use.

The enemy is still unsure what to do; It may be though that you gather in El Charruba area to protect the retreat and attack us if we go to Mechili. For us it would be good to go too, but there we go.

Not there is no doubt that following the surprise of our initiative, the enemy lost any offensive ambitions; lost huge deposits, many vehicles and 46 tanks ongoing repair. There were also American tanks manufactured in 1941. On the other hand our losses, both in tanks and men are minimal. The troop has a lot of spirit and who couldn't fight was very depressed for this; the time will come when everyone will be employed. If the enemy advances I will fight.

The C.A.M. took very well the 20 and 25; has advanced very quickly and has performed very well on the field of battle orders. I've already commended.

It would be good if the C.A.M. had recon.

*Gambarà.* It is also our wish and we will give it to them as soon as possible. Rommel. How long?

*Gambarà.* We look forward to the armored cars from Italy; are ready but unfortunately are not yet met. We are also preparing many batteries from 65, 75, and 100; and

we have special bullets. Everything will feel as soon as possible as it is our wish.

*Rommel.* I'll be very happy. The «Trieste» is a bit up in the air; It would be better if you could get forward a recon group.

*Gambara* Also this is expected. These are issues that are all in gestation.

*Rommel.* Believe it is necessary to leave the 11th battalion of the «Littorio» towards the Tunisian frontier? I wouldn't press too; But what if you could bring it here I would be very grateful. The French Division has already landed in N.A. but in the area of Derna.

*Gambara* Tunis is a fashion thing now; soon will pass.

*Rommel.* I would be grateful for a battalion to the «Trieste» the «Ariete » is already good.

*Gambara.* We agree; the «Trieste» must have many tanks if it does not come with trucks on the battlefield.

*Rommel.* Il Duce was delighted, said General Rintelen. First thought is not possible; only those who come here can see. The enemy was all concentrated in Wadi Faregh and we had North a line of artillery.

The C.A.M. and Leut. Col. Marks made in haste; the third day was already over to Saunnu and Antelat already had on the bases of the enemy without striking a blow. Since the third day the enemy was surrounded. Some managed to escape but the materials and artillery have been abandoned. The first day we lost a tank.

Following a brief discussion on the issue of fuel.

General Rommel says that the fix is in, but for now is not bad since the great raid doesn't. Says it has received so far 350 tons and would like other thousand which will return when the German petrol. He replied that we, as the Colonel Nasi, 3900 tons of gasoline and 1000 diesel fuel; that the thousand tons required given but that if good to take.

*Rommel.* I'm going to take them. I then still a prayer to make. Exploring transportation are few; You must have auxiliary means. I am convinced that the British vans would respond well; but you must have a piece of a machine gun and anti-tank and use three means patrols. You would have a great item that on the other hand does not have to always fight.

*Gambara.* Right; but where are they? If I give them I check them immediately.

*Rommel.* For the Italians would go the 1100.

*Gambara.* We do not and then you wreak immediately. If you give me 40 British means I put them in order.

*Rommel.* We put them all out of order.

*Gambara.* I'm sweating to glean a few vans, while everywhere there are. For every two vans would give you a heavy truck.

*Rommel.* Okay; do not forget it. Regarding Marada, now no longer important, but it's good that you go too the GaF. battalion

The meeting lasts for about a quarter of an hour, present only his Excellency Gambara, Marchesi and Calvi and General Rommel.

*p.c.c.*

*Lieutenant-Colonel of the G.S.*

*Quinto Ravajoli*

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA  
UPPER CONTROL ARMS AND FORCES IN NORTH AFRICA  
GENERAL STAFF

No 2826/prot 01. Op.

On, February 9, 1942-XX

Excellency Cavallero,

Refer in brief to interview General Rommel-General Gambaro place in Benghazi last 8<sup>th</sup> present Leut. Col. Montezemolo. Leut. Colonel will report more extensively to putting voice out the shades *also say the same*.

General Rommel made his debut with the enemy situation and our exposure. For relevance to the enemy believes that this will not make any serious offensive forces for an expected period of a few months at least, take heavy losses and its disorganization. Considers enemy able to dare sprees with light elements offensive backed by tanks, in particular the consideration that you noticed the very texture of the axis troops operating on a Cyrenaica.

Claims that these episodes may put in painful need to abandon the Cyrenaica if you do not immediately run for cover by sending infantry troops on the plateau.

Mossagli on conscientious objection so long as there was still sent the mobile Corp responded immediately, ensures that sorting the C.A.M., to move immediately in the area of Mechili-rejoining the 9<sup>th</sup> bersaglieri already started earlier & the C.T.A. to reach the area immediately west of Berta. Speaking then of the location of XXI and X Corps (already known to you), pointed out

-that "*felt very strange that an army commander could not have the troops that were placed under his orders*", using a advise way from the situation and temporary;

-and militarily speaking, he was always able to do some good deeds, but not under the conditions in which he was placed;

-that the conquest of Cyrenaica had such resonance in world politics, which wasn't possible now-- after overrunning with only a handful of forces, and slight losses-let the at the mercy of any trivial episode enemy offensive, not to be able to send the forces needed;

-who could not leave the enemy the simple armor available for not putting these to be destroyed by enemy artillery and not to be compelled to excessive splitting would allow him not to-at the moment of need-the *mass* for maneuver;

-that, finally, the conditions under which he was placed he'd been forced to decline the assignment that he was committed to "Commander of the forces involved."

He then demanded to be made by the Comando Superiore by persuasion at the Comando Supremo in order to obtain the availability of the X Corps., which



would deploy over Tmimi-Mechili line - getting organized to Halfaya type defense - German 90<sup>th</sup> in holding in the Maraua area, the C.A.M. and C.T.A. in the zone to the West of Berta Mechili -always ready to maneuver, and the 21st in the current deployment to protect the via Balbia with the Division «Pavia» defense material in Benghazi, which would set a stronghold.

Before that express declarations of General Rommel-that of maximum wide share - also in the credits: that keeping the Cyrenaica with only a few forces currently stationed there, would leave the settlers (about 10,000) at the mercy of the Arabs and of the enemy; that would be in aviation very serious trouble for acting on the enemy due to the remoteness of certain fields; that possession of the territory guarantees a promising harvest; you would achieve an overall deployment more collected and then certainly more robust, I would endorse the wish of Rommel, where appropriate with some particular variant, already discussed with the Leut. Col. Montezemolo, who appointed expressly to Your voice want to perform.

For relevance to the logistics situation, I believe that-given the recent influxes and those heralded, albeit at the cost of efforts and special-it is possible to deal with the crisis period until the note requesting vehicles could be satisfied and the port of Benghazi has been put back in working order.

Bastico

*p.c.c.*

*Lieutenant-Colonel of the G.S.*

Quinto Ravajoli

SUPREME COMMAND

At Higher Command Armies A.S.

30419/0 p. (.) Par Excellence Bastico (.) At 01/4655 (.)

May 23, 1942

Orders received from the Duce as follows (.)

The Duce directive & those to verbally confirm to me SuperASI are entirely the directives of February this year which are still in force (.) It is clear that preparation to capture Tobruk as premise at further advance towards the East implies Cyrenaica conservation all the more if you keep this ongoing enhancing lead Benghazi & Derna (.)

Duce in conversation with Rommel has noted Rommel exposure about his concepts use C.T.A. & C.A.M. under employment protection secures our divisions infantry divisions and 90th Light «Afrika» in order to beat opposing mobile forces that attempt to advance (.) Duce has also approved the following concepts that have been previously discussed between Rommel & Supreme Command (.)

1<sup>st</sup>-can't keep the concept first exhibited that capture Tobruk could be immediately followed by advanced eastward so that the capture should be preceded by a tough battle against opposing mobile forces in Marmarica (.)

2<sup>nd</sup> -for Tobruk Rommel plans should go over the summer while it is necessary prevent consolidation new opponent (.) At this end a regular mobile forces attack against the forces opposing furniture may be possible in the short term (,) for example between two or three months (,) subject to logistic features (.)

3<sup>rd</sup> -for advanced eastward Rommel said to predict use a new Italian armored Division & another Germanic Division (.) All this corresponds to directives of 11 February kept in mind the premise of same detectives & falls within freedom of action left by Rommel at command context under article 3<sup>rd</sup> of that document (...) Therefore remains firm even the principle contained therein to ensure the area first Ajdabiya (...) The passage then authorized "Brescia" depending on Rommel had for purpose to facilitate carrying out its task as Rommel over formulated (.)

Everything in those circumstances is well established (.)

1<sup>st</sup> - the first area East Ajdabiya responsible army you must provide with available forces & without rely on the Division "Bologna" (.)

2<sup>nd</sup> - use Division "Bologna" East bound at Tripolitania and not contribute to Ajdabiya Defense (.)

3<sup>rd</sup> -For everything else Rommel preserves freedom of action as defined by directives February that (,) as mentioned above (,) remain in force (.)

4<sup>th</sup> -Stays firm verbally directive imparted to me at Command that start as soon as possible the Constitution of advanced logistics base in the area of el Agheila-Ajdabiya (...)

5<sup>th</sup> -stand from last order from me verbally imparted the 14<sup>th</sup> current at Misurata with a plunger in the defense of the Libyan Sahara in co-operation with the airpower according to agreements that were established at the same interview attended by generals Fougier & Marchesi (...) A copy of this telegram was delivered to General von Rintelen with mandate to communicate it to General Rommel (...)

Ugo Cavallero

ARMORED ARMY COMMAND «AFRIKA»\

No. 17/42. Secret Chiefs G.S.

March 24, 1942

Subject: preparations for the attack according to the interview of the day 18 March 1942 between the Duce and General Rommel.

Excellence General Ettore Bastico  
Commander than FF. AA. A.S.

Based on the meeting on March 18 between the Duce, General of the army Cavallero with Rommel, General of the army that the Armored "Afrika" Army must prepare for the continuation of the attack, with the goal of beating the English army, then take Tobruk and advance further over Bardia- Sollum, the task of the army is changed.

While his task so far was to protect Tripolitania with a conduct of mobile warfare in Cyrenaica-if necessary, abandoning even Cyrenaica itself-now according to the directives of the Duce of the day 18 March the army must:

- a) maintain possession solidly Southeast margin of Cyrenaica as springboard;
- b) begin preparations for the attack itself.

According to the following judgment on enemy forces were calculated and the means needed to respond successfully to the new tasks of the army.

It is not possible to predict whether the enemy, seen broadly, despite its perilous situation in the Pacific area intends to repeat in the coming months its offensive to Tripolitania.

We must, however, always count on this possibility as long as the enemy in N.A., including Egypt, have about 780 tanks and 200 armored cars. Making the comparison between enemy forces at Bardia, Tobruk, Gazala, Bir el Gobi, and those of the army, is currently British superiority of 9 infantry bds., and a numerically almost equal opposing armored forces, while undoubtedly there is considerable English superiority in ammunition reserves of provisions and fuel first. While the comparison of forces is a British superiority 3 times for armored cars and double for light vehicles, the ratio is more favorable for heavy vehicles and anti-tank vehicles.

In this field you can admit a superiority of Italian-German units. However the enemy located west of Tobruk, in terms of forces, is always able to carry out an attack with limited objective.

The British bet of disturbance made the day 21 March with forces of about a brigade, in the direction of Martuba-Tmimi, has already demonstrated that the army, as a result of the current proportion of forces, and scarce fuel, first reserves in case of a stronger enemy attack only hardly could keep the Southeast margin of Cyrenaica.

To keep absolutely in hand, according to orders, this springboard and for

reach a favorable situation for the continuation of the attack, the army intends to occupy a front along the line south of Mechili-Der Sciahra-bu T mimi South, continuing to do this the XXI Corps and troops so far deployed in the defense of Cyrenaica and Central ready for use mobile behind the Center, approximately in area of B. Haleg-Eleba and more Southwest two motorized Corps.

Because in this way the army will have gathered the bulk of his forces on the Southeast margin of Cyrenaica, to carry out its new tasks, the Comando Superiore is requested to take the safety of Ajdabiya district. Also please do come in the Division of the army command.

In General, the Armored Army command please put, possibly soon to its dependencies, all troops that already are in Africa and provided for a continuation of the attack, to make possible a *unit trained* for the intended use.

In particular the continuation of the attack depends on the satisfying of the following desires:

*1<sup>st</sup> - by the Comando Superiore Armed Forces. N.A.. '*

*a) for German troops:*

-Motorization (of condition) of three groups with heavy artillery tractors Italians (current coastal artillery).

-help by supply columns (first of all tankers);

*b) for Italian troops.*

-put under Armored Army Armored Division "Littorio".

-completion of all divisions according to expected formation firstly of the XX Corps (for "Ariete" takes at least 200 tanks),-creation of two armored battalions for the XX Corps,-increased heavy batteries A/A (of 88),

-equipment of the divisions and Corps troops with their own vehicles.

*2nd -German General in Rome.*

*a) for German troops.*

-accelerated transport of personnel complements and personnel of units by air and by sea (convoys of ships). For this purpose must be transported 12,000 complements;

-urgent transport by sea of the material of the following units:

1 co. tanks for the 5<sup>th</sup> Tank Reg.,

288<sup>th</sup> Special Unit,

2 half companies of the Brandenburg regt.,

707<sup>th</sup> co. heavy guns for the infantry,

11<sup>th</sup> co. of 115<sup>th</sup> Fusilier regt.,

70th regt. fog Cannon (mot) ([coniniettori d](#)),

4<sup>th</sup> bty. the 772<sup>nd</sup> artillery regt. (170 mm. guns),

155<sup>th</sup> compound artillery regt.,

command of the battery II/150 art. regt.

personnel of the artillery command 104<sup>th</sup>,

3<sup>rd</sup> co. 200<sup>th</sup> pioneer battalion,  
remnant of the 43<sup>rd</sup> group Regt. A/A.  
I Bn of 6<sup>th</sup> Regt. A/A.,  
617<sup>th</sup> A/A. Bn. (co 1. has already been delivered),  
778<sup>th</sup> co. landing pioneers,  
100 links Army Regiment (the Bn. and parts of Reg.) remainder of the 190<sup>th</sup> compound, co. links,  
475<sup>th</sup> compound Bn. A/T connections,  
200<sup>th</sup> compound Bn. Armored links;

-transport equipment of materials necessary for the completion of the German units, as well as various units of supply (governing bodies for the ammunition and fuel, workshops for tanks and vehicles, health care establishments etc.). Will be broadcast later on its list, which is the earlier of transport;

-supply with 20 armored army supply units, 20 days of catering and about 5 unfoc;

b) *for Italian troops* to:

-transporting Armored Division «Centaur» for the Armored Army «Afrika»

-transport by air and sea for the completion of the units, according to the planned training;

-2 partial motorization infantry divisions (one of the X Corp and XX Corp);

-complete motorization corps artillery and Italian Corps;

-1 Regt. heavy art. completely motorized, and 1 bombardment Bn;

-supply of Italian troops to the same extent as provided for German troops.

The reinforcement of the German Corps troops needed for the execution of the action-the mortars, 1 Group of 100 mm. cannons and 3 groups heavy field howitzers groups and 1 Bn. Pioneer Corps, I of the Army Corps and 1 Bn.. paratroopers-will be required to the Supreme Command of the German army. Based on the influx of these reinforcements, the army's armored command will communicate objectives and attack times.

*Commander-in-Chief*

Rommel

*General of the Army*

## GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA

COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES NORTH AFRICA  
GENERAL STAFF- OPERATIONS OFFICE

11 p.m., March 28, 1942-XX

*Supreme command, par excellence, the Chief of the General staff, Rome*

01/4863/Op. (.) On specific request of General Rommel I sent General Barbasetti day 25<sup>th</sup> current to him (.) General Rommel after exposure situations our enemy and said that current German-Italian troops in Cyrenaica responds concept of “protect Tripolitania with conduct of mobile warfare in Cyrenaica (.) abandoning if need be even Cyrenaica itself” (.) New task entrusted by the Duce in March 18 interview & Rommel in concrete “preparation for the continuation of the attack (.) with a goal to beat the field army to then take Tobruk and advance further over Bardia (-) Salum” requires according to Rommel keep solidly southern margin (-) Eastern Cyrenaica “how” (springboard, whence the need to) strengthen current deployment and occupy a new zone that he considers good base & which he considers essential to prevent sustained possession of the enemy (.) As a result he intends to place on the front row on the line Tmimi (-) Der bu Schara (-) from East to West Mechili XXI A.C. (.) 90<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Division (.) X AC advanced detachments North Signals line (-) B. Tengeder (;) all these forces on the positions to be strengthened with task essentially & solidly stops (.) In the second group (.) C. T.A. about 20 km. South of Martuba and AC to the right of the XX C. T.A. riding Mechili track (-) Derna (.) with maneuver task at East & West of Mechili (.) He has already deployed the C. T.A. and the XX A.C. at just time zones and ordered shift: XXI A.C. & movements 90<sup>th</sup> German Division & «Pavia» (.) Asked if he felt with this directive the Duce observed “to ensure protection against attacks from Benghazi and South (-) East through employment first Ajdabiya area” he said that in his opinion the Benghazi area (-) Ajdabiya is indirectly from the occupation zone defense Tmimi (-) Mechili (-) Tengeder (.) is not acceptable for large enemy forces advance westward leaving on our entire lineup (;) jobs line Segnali Nord (-) Tengeder reaches even the southern areas (tracks &, also controlled) with Aviation (.) as employment Gialo closes provenance Giarabub (.) Therefore assured according to his judgment and responsibility this indirect defense line & observed so he considered questionable not the fulfillment of the above-mentioned directive of the Duce (.) he decided to make use of the freedom granted by action directives 11 February, 24 March (.) by ordering as a result moving XXI A.C. (.) Represented them which dictated moving over 500 km. current well-known exacerbates poor species in terms of logistics trucks & fuels (.) Rommel has entered to the concept of run it gradually over several weeks (.) Barbasetti reported impression that Rommel is somewhat influenced by recent enemy activity

could penetrate almost undisturbed Marturba & retire then capturing an entire German stronghold (,) that gives the opponent new possibilities and intentions and cares to strengthen advanced deployment and use device that has less chance of immediate penetration (.) Given that & Rommel's personality & task entrusted to him I can't exclude & I then accept the thesis that he supported indirect defense of Benghazi (-) Ajdabiya (.) But since I'm always possible infiltration of non-notable albeit nuclei through the wilderness with intention to disturb our backline (,) make destructions & acts sabotage (,) It is need to & I will establish a mild but direct protection with fewer long line departments currently held by XXI A.C. and patrol service along via Balbia from Benghazi in Marsa Brega (.) Gradually move the XXI AC will meet new logistical requirements and tactics (.) Report details in the next letter (.) Being my intentioned meeting as soon as possible please let me know with Rommel if Comando Supremo has comments to the above (.)

Bastico



COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES N.A.  
GENERAL STAFF

Misurata, on April 10, 1942-XX

*Comando Supremo –Rome*

01/5018 /Op. (.) Your premise 30460 authorize my reference note that as mentioned in my 01/4863 telegraph question already proposed but not decisions that Rommel has already considered taking even before the famous March 25 with talk

Barbasetti using directive discretion granted by February 24 March (;) so as telegraph said he has already ordered related movements started including & that XXI A.C. (.) as though (,) known as (,) has already gotten running gradual shift & not yet initiated infantry divisions movements but only that of the XXI Corps & supplementary troops (,) I meet with Rommel which I have already communicated this command decisions which should be facilitated by the fact that following program 3625 sheet of 23 March substantial reinforcements have already been sent these days either are going to start already deployed divisions (.) I will result (.) I pause recognition

Libyan Sahara of which my 73 date 31 March (.)

Bastico

COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES N.A.  
GENERAL STAFF

Measured, on 10 April, 1942-XX

*Supreme command, par excellence, the Chief of the General staff, Rome*

01/5105/Op. (.) I mean my 01/5018 of today (.) It is likely to say of course that is going to push strongly for Rommel not to modify the provisions already given & per Division and not a corps command (who are already his orders) for security purpose Ajdabiya that he precisely held to declare to be according to its assessment already reached (.) He probably once more shut itself away behind personal prestige issue provided that should now change substantially orders from him already given (without telling me in advance) to Corps commanders since returned to Libya after meeting with the Duce (,) several times to these commanders also confirmed verbally while having received your 30419 of March 24 (,) & now have already begun implementation (.) Since I already established conversation with Rommel for your welcome to tell me at 03:00 current morning polite urgency if bring about the event mentioned above I should show uncompromising (what with the whole likely would lead to a clear mutual stance) or if they made every effort provided Rommel to change his orders in full conformity with telegram 30460 (,) I can at the end (-) as I would of notice (-) compromise on provisions already given by him and already partly implemented (.) This is also in consideration that peremptory status of the Duce is Ajdabiya securable could be met by bringing to Ajdabiya & zone taking my more than direct the “Bologna” Division also other forces equal roughly to a Division as for example moving them would quickly grouping (which when in place will also act to element operated actions) a G.a.F Regiment and other battalions now groups that have become available and as a result accurate reductions et in rearrangements territorial organization (.)

Bastico

COMANDO SUPREMO

April 10, 1942, hours 00:55

From: Comando Supremo.

To: Supercomando A.S.

Prot. 30466/op. (.) For His Excellency Bastico (.)

Your response today 01/5018 (.) Duce directives on 24 March they prescribed were explicit and ensure security constraint Benghazi against attacks from the South and from the Southeast through employment say first occupation Ajdabiya (.)

This command cannot therefore share your interpretation that moving two divisions XXI Army Corps falls within the freedom given command army action all the more that was explicitly told not to rely on Infantry Division «Bologna» to Ajdabiya area occupation (.)

In those circumstances the meeting you have with Rommel specified that the directives contained our precise orders represent 30460 Duce & must be observed (.) Your task will be facilitated by as you say quite rightly expected gradation of movements designed to your personal news our 30460 guidelines were released for information purposes to the O.K. W. (.)

Ugo Cavallero

GOVERNOR GENERAL OF LIBYA

COMANDO SUPERIORE OF THE ARMIES IN NORTH AFRICA  
GENERAL STAFF-OPERATIONS OFFICE

N. 01/5708/0 p. of prot.

P.M. 11, April 11, 1942-XX

To Comando Supremo - Military Post 21.

My reference 01/5679/Op. 10 April's posting here joint text communication forwarded to General Rommel.

Purpose provide clarification on that Command situation created by recent transactions and by moving the line resistance, I write with the main demands made by X, and XX C.A. by the same general Rommel:

1<sup>st</sup> - XX C.A. telegraphs: "General Rommel ordered that trucks of the XX C. A. transportation divisions conduct "Brescia" & "Pavi" on the new line. Represents fix where XX C.A. for vehicles given distances & continuous movement. It is Command that I must replace at least 100 vehicles partly inefficient & low expectations partly desert area (...). It is indispensable advance services are also in the Intendenza in the area of Tmimi. Are also needed at least ten vehicles replace three inefficient... '.

2<sup>nd</sup> – X C.A. telegraphs: "I represented serious logistic situation in which will be C.A. with online transfer signals that cannot be overcome without me assigning vehicles needed to guarantee life in full desert my troops and possibly supply various combat cases. Please give me trucks where my sheet 2645 of date 8<sup>th</sup> current".

3<sup>rd</sup> - finally General Rommel did say that "the situation on the front side the XXI is rather delicate for C.A. insufficient infantry force available & therefore asks the remaining elements of the transport acceleration Division "Trento": transport that according to previous agreements had to be done gradually, provided that new line Mechili - Halegh el Eleba- Tmimi upon line should be within one month from March 25 (see our telegraph No. 01/4663 of 28 March).

It is noted that our situation was widely shown to General Rommel, also in personal contact with him, especially since he for his character, as also recognized by employees themselves, does not give to the logistics-and typically the preparation-the importance that is attributed to them by each captain and expert here, take distances, terrain, water scarcity, failing railways even greater value. He was also widely discussed strengthening program ordered by his Excellency Chief of the G.S. General, making him reach daily continuous improvement and the situation sensitive effects obtained or already in progress (units with additional reinforcement, increased three organic infantry companies perfectly and imminent sending another 14, 6 divisional batteries increase mobility from 75 or 100 increased by 4 - 20 mm. anti-aircraft batteries, rise of a group of 2- 90/35 mm. batteries and two anti-aircraft batteries of 20 mm., the next starting other 19 - 75 batteries

also of 100 mm., the beginning of a advanced logistics base); Finally, it is noted that the impending influx, already ordered, a new battalion cleared up (X) new type tank (M 14-41) would soon be done at our own armored forces a contribution that, given the situation of our tanks and British, in case things could have been decisive.

Even in the last 3 April talk did note that-unless war taxation independent of our will, or by exceptionally favorable occasions-there was convenience given tempo of services in Cyrenaica, now precarious & inadequate for offensive operations, to consolidate and upgrade program to develop as much as possible, depending on it the ability to achieve first goals ordered by the Duce and the possibility of exploiting in depth our successes.

To cope with the new situation, which in all ways we will endeavor to rectify-& which remedy-a general Rommel, having shown once again the difficulties and the inability to accede simultaneously to all new requests submitted by him, and for his doing again according to the gravity of the situation that could be now created by large enemy initiatives I outlined the need to share and size the same requests

I'll do my best to satisfy them gradually at the same time I will meet-and it will be replaced-even at the cost of reductions to temporary abnormal situation.

In that regard, I would be grateful to any command that acceleration in sending vehicles.

*The General of the army  
comandante superiore Armed forces. N. A.  
Ettore Bastico*

GOVERNOR GENERAL OF LIBYA  
The Comandante Superiore Armed Forces In North Africa

P.M. April 12, 1942-XX

Dear Cavallero,

My telegram 01/5708/Op. you will, I believe, shows and the new clarified enough situation that you came by with a forward movement that I consider it unnecessary and inappropriate, does not conform to our interests.

This time it is repeated that occurred during the battle of the Marmarica and during the actions that led to the reoccupation of Cyrenaica.

Rommel judges and acts to impressions and never lingers to deepen the problem time to time presents itself, so that what he says and says today is often belied by what he thinks and works tomorrow. A good news puts in euphoria, a bad depresses him and makes him appear black what he judged to be white.

During the interview of the current the 3<sup>rd</sup> month he appeared as well including the situation in which we find ourselves and the need for an adequate period of calm that the industrious, I believed I was convinced and satisfied; but then as the greatest enemy and exploratory activity increasing vehicles remarkable, reported from aerial reconnaissance, as well as some information provided by prisoners, were able to assume, as adhering to reality; the strengthening of the enemy units online or, at best, a change of departments, Rommel, I don't know if what elements, formed the conviction (or so he claimed) that the British prepare a withdrawal on backward and positions without worrying about nothing else, went into action.

He orders data, although, as usual, and inaccurate summaries, reveal this preconception; However, the void that he has found in front of if, caused it to advance, until they found some enemy resistance and returned to a more objective evaluation of the situation, chose a new stop position, but though-considered in itself-in the most benign hypothesis we can evaluate tactically as before, this was and is logistically worse and also has the disadvantage of being more exposed to enemy attacks.

As I said in my telegram, I've been trying now to make him understand, in polite manner, the new crisis in which he placed his forces and in particular our need, even completion and reorganization, but I don't have too much confidence that the unacceptability of this crisis is admitted by him; and I do not exclude that the emergence of another preconception should not repeat what happened now.

Animated by an ambition that manifests itself, from this often drive and since it supports the practice of large units, command falls in excess of where I think he himself doesn't understand the scope.

Of course my command is trying to remedy this crisis, which can be remedied, *evidently, to the detriment of desired upgrade, with troop sacrifices and also delay the establishment of the base note*; but it is certain that Rommel, which nobody denies courage and boldness to all evidence, leaves always arouses the concern of rash steps.

*If it were possible, I believe that a reference to a more peaceful situation assessment, which came from above, all would benefit. and I might also add that it would be appropriate that any further upper get directive not directly, but through this command: command that I understand to be judged by him not too comfortable, but absolutely channeled your directives (who wants to be respected), lens and also animated by the best encourage interactions.*

I think well make you aware that when he returned from the license after the interview with the Duce, in meeting desired by him on March 25 with Barbasetti, warned that under the new tasks directly assigned to him he had ordered the move of the XXI Corps. Asked how he felt satisfied the fundamental condition posed by the Duce of the occupation of the area first of Ajdabiya in protection of Benghazi, he supported the famous thesis of indirect protection because Barbasetti shared not across the diversity of interpretation of a directive of the Duce, proposed to Rommel to ask clarification in Rome, Rommel refused categorically, saying that he was out of the question for him issues. He didn't need to ask anything and that he had already decided. Hence our appeal to you, and the need of your intervention, which ended the matter with an exhaustive order, as here you wanted, and to whom he felt obliged certainly comply.

Above I believed my duty to represent you, and not for any discharge of my responsibilities, but as long as your thoughts can stop on certain considerations which, dictated by a calm examination of persons and facts cannot, highlight subject to official communications, but seem nevertheless worthy of being known.

With affectionate devotion

Ettore Bastico

COMMAND ARMORED ARMY «AFRIKA»

No. 31/42 secret to Commands headquarters,

Q.G., April 30, 1942-XX

To Comando Superiore Armed Forces N.A.

To the Commander South (with excerpt for the Fliegerführer Afr.)

To German General at the Italian Comando Supremo

To German Navy commander in Italy

1-the command of the army means, using the currently favorable balance of power, attacking in the first days of June 1942 (lunar favorable period) British forces located in the area of Bir el Gobi-Tobruk-Ain el Gazala – Bir Hakeim, and annihilate them. In addition, intends to take (continuing the action) the fortress of Tobruk, possibly with a coup de main, otherwise obtained attack procedure.

The attack of A.C.A. should be conducted preferably only after the capture of Malta. If operations against Malta should be extended beyond the first day of June, however, it may be necessary for the army to attack steps without waiting for the taking of Malta.

The German General to Rome should communicate what time is planned the attack against Malta. From this and from the realization of the premises listed in paragraph 2 is dependent upon the determination of the period for A.C.A's attack. If the attack against Malta, for some reason, were to be returned, the command of A.C.A. it should be immediately informed.

2<sup>nd</sup> - the conduct of operations, in broad terms, is scheduled as follows: *mass turning Attack of motorized units* from the area to the South and immediately north of the Segnali Nord, by the two parties of Bir Hakeim, direction found here. *Elements of motorized units*, appearing from nowhere, must point towards Belhamed-El Adem, to prevent both an enemy withdrawal from Tobruk, and the rush of reinforcements from the area of Bardia. Non-motorized units of the army will be used for the front between Segnali Nord and the East Coast.

You want to try to annihilate the English army field mass by the evening of the second day of the attack, in the area west of Tobruk. Consequently, and without interruption, you want to try to take the fortress of Tobruk with a coup. If this is not feasible, the stronghold should be taken with obtained attack procedure, from the South-East and South. For this will need to be more two days, so that the mass of motorized troops, after reordering units and completion of supplies, about the sixth day of attack will be ready to point further eastwards, towards Sollum -Bardia.

3rd -the conditions for the successful implementation of the above mentioned operations are:

I.-*German units of C. A.*

a) *transport in Africa of the following reinforcements* during the month of May by the German General in Rome:



*aa)* list the order of urgency of A.C.A. on April 15, 1942 until n. 21, and the numbers 26, 30 and 39,  
*bb)* 57 tanks III and IV as from number 50 to 54/42 secret commands on April 22, 1942 German

General in Rome.

*cc)* insurance by the Comando Supremo of the German army for further reinforcements, as No 1049/42 secret commands on April 28, 1942 German General in Rome;

*b)* supply of German units with 25 fuel units, 5 units of ammunition and food for 30 days. Of these, 15 fuel units, unit 3 ammunition and food for 15 days set aside in advance. Also you need the mass transport of supplies in Benghazi and the Italian vehicles promised by the Comando Supremo.

II. *Italian Unit A C.A.*

*a)* completion of all Italian units during the month of May in accordance to the prescribed organic by Comando Supremo in personnel, weapons and vehicles;

*b)* assigning at least one infantry division currently located in the area of Ajdabiya in order to liberate the motorized units for mobile use. According to the command of A.C.A. the further stay of forces at Ajdabiya is no longer needed, because as a result of the current trend of front, the relationship of forces, as well as for climatic reasons (full summer) is excluded in the near future a threat of that area;

*c)* supply of Italian units within the month of May with 25 units of fuel, 5 unfoc, and food for 30 days. Of these 15 fuel units, 3 unfoc and food for 15 days set aside in advance.

It is also *urgently* wanted:

*d)* formation of a truck Battalion for the transport of a Infantry Division at once.

The Comando Superiore is requested to communicate if the above conditions are achievable by the end of May.

III. *contest of the Air Force German and Italian* proportions more possible, to destroy the enemy air force and for the immediate support of land operations against the British and against the field fortress of Tobruk, particularly through flank coverage. Particularly support I want to will be defined and communicated at the appropriate time.

The Top Commander South (Field marshal Kesselring) is requested to communicate:

*a)* to what extent we can rely on the contest of German and Italian units by fighters, by dive bomber, torpedo boats, bombers and paratroopers;

*b)* which time frame is necessary for transporting these units and their preparation for action in Africa.

For the above-mentioned aerial unit a supply is deemed necessary in advanced area for 20 days of fighting and 30 days of food.

The Top Commander South, please also put at the disposal of A.C.A. For ground action another mixed anti-aircraft group (possibly the I/6<sup>th</sup>).

IV.-*Co-operation of the German Navy and Italian* using all forces available:

*a)* MAS against the sea and coastal zone of Tobruk;

*b)* submarines, with the center of gravity forward Tobruk and Alexandria.

*c)* torpedo boats and minesweepers for escort, part mine and dredging in the Benghazi-Tobruk;

*d)* Navy pontoons for landing German assault troops to the West and East of Tobruk, as well as for coastal escort;

*e)* Italian maritime forces and heavy and assault vehicles to engage the fleet English of Alexandria.

German General in Rome and the Commander of the German Naval Command in Italy must take corresponding agreements with Comando Supremo and notify me.

*aa)* to what extent we can rely on the participation of German and Italian naval forces;

*bb)* how long take these naval forces to assume their positions of departure.

The Commander in Chief  
Rommel  
Colonel General

COMANDO SUPREMO

N° 30760/Op.

May 5, 1942-XX

Subject: operations in Marmarica.

To his Excellency the Comandante Superiore of the Armed Forces, N.A.

11 p.m.

Directives of this Comando Supremo on 23 March provide the convenience that before the summer to run from one part of the army forces in action against the deployment of the enemy mobile forces to prevent them to consolidate current positions.

This Comando Supremo has taken knowledge of the project that the Commander of the army in accordance with the above mentioned directives is subjected.

Kept in mind the degree of recovery achieved by C.A., D.A.K. and XX and deficiencies still exist in the Italian infantry divisions that are part of C.A. X and XXI, especially as regards vehicles, this Comando Supremo specifies the following:

1<sup>st</sup> - *objective*: to beat opposing mobile forces, deployed to the West of Tobruk. The conquest of Tobruk. In the event of favorable outcome obtained attack against Tobruk. The capture of Tobruk is categorical condition for moving forward on our sides; If such a condition, the deployment will be brought on line Sollum -Halfaya-Sidi Omar, Ain el Gazala line.

2<sup>nd</sup> - *forces and means for the operation*: 1st the units available to the army command; 2nd the Italian and German air forces stationed in Cyrenaica, strengthened as will be notified separately; 3rd some light Naval means will be later specified as excluded the participation of naval surface forces.

3<sup>rd</sup> - *operation time*: towards the end of May, after they arrived in Cyrenaica means and reinforcements required, for whose early turnout Comando Supremo will strive by every means.

4th-time available for this operation: the operations cannot continue beyond June 20, since this time will have to be withdrawn the naval air units as well as a reinforced part of the air force currently in Cyrenaica, all these being for the date above for other use. A resumption of operations must be scheduled for autumn.

*The Chief of the General staff*  
Ugo Cavallero

## ENEMY SITUATION

*The British forces in North Africa* (Appendix 1) depend on “*Top Command of the Middle East.*”

*Commander:* Gen. Auchinlek, in Cairo.

*Deployment.*

1<sup>st</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> Army. *Commander:* Gen. Ritchie.

Headquarters: Marsa Mastruh. Advanced tactical command: North-West of Gambut.

a) *XIII Corp:* *Commander:* Gen. Gott. Tactical command at Bir Bellefaa, with:

1<sup>st</sup> South African Inf. Div. (3 infantry brigades);

2<sup>nd</sup> South Africa Inf. Div. garrison of the fortress of Tobruk;

50<sup>th</sup> Infantry div. (3 infantry brigades).

b) *XXX Corp:* *Commander:* Gen. Norrie, tactical Command at Azual Mnefa with:

1<sup>st</sup> Arm. Div. (7 tank Brg, 1 Motorized Brg.)

7<sup>th</sup> Arm. Div. (2 tank Brg, 1 Motorized Brg, with the 1<sup>st</sup> Free French light Bn.);

5<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Div. (2 infantry brg.).

c) *Units in the rear of the army:*

*Garrison troops* of Sidi Barrani, Marsa Matruh (Free French parachute bn.?), Geravla, Sidi Hanciah with weak forces;

*special forces* of the army and air force at Giarabub “*Long Range Desert Group*” and “*Special Air Service Erig*”).

2<sup>nd</sup> – *British troops in Egypt* (B. T. E.) employed by the X Corp. command at Cairo. Under this are also garrisoned troops and units who are in Egypt to recover or to be transported.

Are known:

a) *Garrison troops*

7<sup>th</sup> English Infantry Division;

12<sup>th</sup> English Infantry Division (part in Sudan);

elements of the 11<sup>th</sup> African Division (indigenous);

38<sup>th</sup> and 77<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Brigade;

troops of the garrisons of Egyptian and Sudanese.

These units are located for the safety of the Nile Delta and Suez Canal and used to form a climax of British dominance in Egypt. Only in small part can be considered capable of employment in the country. Their allocation of vehicles comes to just half the endowment of an infantry division.

b) *Troops in passage:*

*To be transported elsewhere:*

4<sup>th</sup> Indian Infantry Division: 1/3 of Division (7<sup>th</sup> Indian brg.) transported to Cyprus, the remainder likely still in the Delta.

*For reconstitution:*

*1<sup>st</sup> Armored Brigade:* It is the rest of 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division returned in 1941 from Greece without material, and currently rebuilding. In addition, light tanks and half of medium ones are in poor condition. Minimum time to be put into condition entering campaign: for 1-7-1942;

*7<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade:* two tank battalions-2nd Rgt. and 7th Hussars-tanks were delivered to the far East. 6th R. T. R. (tank Regiment) remained in Egypt is perhaps used to reconstitute the two other tank battalions of the Brigade. At the latest will be ready for use for 1-7-1942;

*8<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade* of the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Division (Palestine-Iraq) is equipped with light and medium tanks of the Americans. It could be ready for use for the 1-7-1942;

*27<sup>th</sup> Lancers* a group recently transported from England. On its staff do not have new news;

*2<sup>nd</sup> Free French light brigade* moved from Syria to Egypt. Force of about 3,500 men, armament and equipment not yet complete;

*5th Indian Infantry Brigade* (mot?) independent Brigade, uncertain texture; limited tactical capabilities.

3<sup>rd</sup> - *Of Major Units in Palestine and Syria* only ready to enter in the field:

*2<sup>nd</sup> div. New Zealand;*

*Polish Brigade;*

*32<sup>nd</sup> Armored Corps Brigade.*

They are also to be added:

*8<sup>th</sup> English Div:* Garrison troop of little tactical value.

*elements 11<sup>th</sup> Africa Div:* garrison troops composed of indigenous units;

*Greeks, Czech* of the force of about two divisions, little tactical value.

*In the far East have been sent:*

*70<sup>th</sup> English Division:* once at Tobruk;

*6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Australian divisions.*

*II-Expected deployment of British units on the front of the Marmarica* (Appendixes 2 and 3).

*1<sup>st</sup> -Exploring Forces.*

Exploration over the past few weeks has been intensified. Exploring units have been increased and was greatly increased their ability fight.

Exploring forces mass is employed by 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. brig. (area of Habesc) of the 7th Armored Division. They are currently:

2 bgt. of the 7th brig. Mot. (II & K.R.R.C.);

2 exploring groups: K.D.G. and IV South African armored car group;

a regt. art. 4<sup>th</sup> light R. N. A.;

a gr. art. medium-sized: 234<sup>th</sup> btr.;

a bgt. Tank: 5<sup>th</sup> R. T. R. (?);

units of anti-tank and anti-aircraft.

From these units were formed many tactical groupings, "Columns",

that generally consist of 1-2 rifle companies, one or more batteries, armored cars and tanks, anti-tank and anti-aircraft sections.

In the sector of the 7<sup>th</sup> Mot. brig. tactical groupings are known as “Tom” (free French?), ‘Maerz’, “Juli” and “August”.

The 6th South African armored cars Group-employed by the 50th Infantry Division -explore in the Central sector. There are known such as the groupings “Melon” and “Rob-Cel”.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> searching South African Group explores the deployment area  
1st Infantry Division South African.

*2nd-Big.*

The bulk of 8th Army is located in Bir Hakeim-El Adem – Tobruk – Ain el Gazala.

a) XXX C.A. with two armored divisions was held ready for noble use in the southern part of the line.

The *7th Armored Division* is currently deployed with the bulk of the forces in the security zone for exploration and security. Therefore his units are explained by Southwest of Bir Tengeder to El Adem. In the case of a sudden attack the Division would not be able to reunite all forces in time.

The *1st Armored Division* has a centralized probably II armored brigade, in the area of Bir el Tamar-Bir Ucheida. You may feel that the 22nd armored brigade reconstituted lies in the area west of Bardia.

The motorized units of the 1st Armored Division are likely to repose in the area north of the via Balbia between Sidi bu Amud and Bardia. Therein has noticed the 5/13/1942, 400 vehicles and 1,400 tents. The Division grants currently licenses in large numbers.

It is noteworthy that the day 5/8/1942 the 76<sup>th</sup> anti-tank group was moved into the Delta and that already before the 25<sup>th</sup> anti-tank Group was assigned to the 50th Infantry Division as well as the 68<sup>th</sup> medium artillery rgt. has decentralized two groups respectively to 7th Armored Division and the 2nd South African Division. So this results in a considerable decrease in the combative ability of the 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division.

*1st Free French light brigade.* You do not need to believe the existence of a sub-unit. The Brigade has a strength of about 5-6,000 men; is employed of the 7th Armored Division.

The *5th Indian Infantry Division* with the 29th and 10th Indian Brigade in truth does not lie in the area of deployment of bulk but is employed by the XXX.

b) XXX C.A. it employs the bulk of the mobile infantry divisions. These divisions are deployed to defend in Bir Bellefaa-Tobruk-Ain el Gazala-Mteifel el Chebir.

The *50th Infantry Division* took over a part of the 1st Armored Division to South of Mteifel el Chebir; the command of the 1<sup>st</sup> armored brigade under the army Division has special tactical grouping assignment which the Tank btg. 44th R. T. R. and 6th battalion of the Green Howards. Probably one infantry brigade of the Division is always resting area northeast of Bir el Armat.

1st South African is Infantry Division deployed in depth on the Gazala line. Employed by the Division are a btg. of the 1<sup>st</sup> armored brigade to the Army Corps -42<sup>nd</sup> R. T. R. (infantry tanks)-and a btg. of American light tanks (38th R.T.R.)

*2nd Infantry Division South African* moved from Bardia to Tobruk which garrison the fort.

Keep in mind that for this task, it is for some months already had been trained in the fortifications of Bardia.

Attached to the Division a tank btg. -8th R. T. R. (infantry tanks).

*3rd-combative Capacity of the unit: see annex No. 3 [omitted].*

III-summary of changes:

*7th Armored Division* returning after reconstitution from Egypt;

*2nd South African Division* of infantry moved from Bardia to Tobruk;

*5th Indian Infantry Division* withdrew for Egypt with command and the 10th Indian Brigade;

*1st Armored Division*-without the command and 2nd armored brigade-moved in behind the lines of the army;

*Royal Dragoons* replaced by the 6th South African armored cars group;

*12th Lancers* replaced by "King's Dragoons Guards";

*7th South African Recon Bn.* probably with the 2nd South Africa Inf. Div.;

*32nd Armored Brigade* probably moved to Palestine-Syria. It is not known where the 7th South African Inf. brig.; Maybe it's still in Bardia.

IV-The tank situation:

a) *Force of the Tank* (see App. 4).

b) *Recovery status* of armored units is currently still very different. There is probably a lack of technical personnel and armored personnel carriers. The crew of the medium American tanks had to be reduced from 7 to 6 men.

The status of preparation of the *2nd Arm. Brig.*, would still be very backward; the same probably applies also for the *22nd Armored brig.*

Instead we must assume greater combative capabilities of *4th Armored Brig.*. This brigade is currently considered the best of the British brigades of North Africa.

c) *American tanks.*

In recent months were allotted to British Armored units many American medium and light tanks. Numerically, the ratio of British light tanks and American light tanks M 3 remains at about 2: 3. From January was assigned to armored units even the American medium M3 tank «Pilot».

By the English in particular criticized American light tanks with the hand-operated turret. With medium tanks M 3 «Pilot»-in contrast to the doctrine and the practice hitherto followed by the English--you can open fire only when stationary. Fire safety in motion does not give away more than 3 -400 meters and therefore cannot be practiced. From information you know that ammunition from 75 for the American medium tank is not sufficient for their needs. Projectile with M 46 fuse bounce when shooting distance from 700 to 1,700 meters, without exploding. Must be tested new fuses.

All these news taken from several British sources indicate at least that the British do not have much confidence about new American tanks, of which the less enters into primarily combat for the first time.

d) *workshops for repair of tanks.*

British shops for repairs of tanks have limited potential. In

North Africa so far was not able to carry out workshops, in addition to normal repairs, reviewing more than 50 tanks per month, of those damaged in the fall - winter 1942.

The engine change for example should be done generally in the Nile Delta.

There is a lack of spare parts and tools for the Americans.

*V-Field Fortifications and mines (App 5).*

a) Are especially *emergency Fortifications* around Bir Hakeim and Mteifel El Chebir - Gazala.

In front of the true line of Gazala deployment system exists in numerous strongpoints and artillery positions. It seems that the mass of the 1<sup>st</sup> South African Division was deployed to defend this position. A portion of the position was done in rock. You must bear in mind that the general Bir Hakeim - Acroma line are strongpoints and systematic battery positions.

An unbroken line, however, does not exist.

Overall, field fortifications have no great value as a means of Defense. Miss them until the Gazala line a sufficient depth. Overall, therefore, they have the exclusive character of strongpoints.

The field fortifications can only slow down the attack.

b) *Mine*. The British Command believed probably very valuable an extensive mine line especially for protection against attack by tanks.

We must therefore provide broad and deep minefields on General Bir Hakeim - Mteifel Chebi r- Ain el Gazala.

Annex 5 shows what you know in this field. But you have to bear in mind that even in the backline with heavy traffic, for example. El Adem can be found minefields.

*VI-Tobruk (annex 6, the map of fortifications 1/25,000).*

a) doesn't seem to have had great changes in the situation in November last year. Although in recent times were repeatedly reported work on fortifications. It expects a strengthening of the minefields. See appendix 5.

b) *forces*.

*The 2nd South African Division*, which moved from Bardia Garrison troops to Tobruk, alone is not sufficient to defend the place. It currently has only two infantry brigades, while last year there were four Inf. brigades. It is expected that the British Command-in case of a German attack on Tobruk will try to bring other forces in place.

The garrison is not able to occupy all the fortifications. Spread out on a broad front and without the possibility of reservations to an attack with forces reunited can't resist a long time.

From the point of view of artillery we calculate that there is a medium caliber rgt. and 2-3 light as well as some position btys.

Inside the line of forts were recognized 23 AA stations 4 pieces one-of which 13 locations in the area of the port. There is to be expected that a part of the artillery AA. will also participate in ground combat.

A intervention by naval warships into the battle will probably only occur if withdrawing the garrison via the sea is tried..



c) Importance of what port of supplies.

Since December last year, Tobruk became the main supply port of the 8th Army. Only in March and April 1942 entered the port 50,000 tons of shipping, corresponding to a load of 80,000 tons. But we must bear in mind that at that time in the ships did not have full load. In the area around Tobruk lays the base of supplies for the troops at the front whose depots which were from this replenished. It is therefore foreseeable that in the area of the fortress of Tobruk are large quantities of all kinds. The conquest of the fortress would therefore serious consequences for the situation of the 8th Army logistics.

The conquest of the fortress would be serious consequences for the situation of the 8th Army's logistics.

VII- *Situation of the traffic.*

a) *vehicles.*

The number of vehicles in the area of deployment of British forces is currently relatively low. It does not match the magnitude of the unit deployed. Or the actual divisions are far below or a large number of vehicles are in the workshops for repairs. In any case you can establish that the units, following the partial lack of repairs to motor vehicles, are not moving at all.

b) *railroad.*

The railway was extended up to 15 km. North-East of Sidi Rezegh.

The main station is the station of Capuzzo with over 3,000 m of deposits. This corresponds to a daily discharge of about 2,500 tons. At the height of the Capuzzo is a major logistical bases.

VIII- *Considerations.*

British divisions operating in Marmarica, the 3 divisions of Inf. (50th English, 1st and 2nd South African) are arranged in defense. The 2nd *Armored Divisions* is staggered for extended area from the south of Bir Tengeder up to Bardia.

The 7th *Armored Division* as well as to the security of South side probably has the task to carry out disruptive actions in security with strong recon units. This Division should be considered rather as a recon and safety G.U.. The 1st *Armored Division* has the bulk of the forces stationed *in* reserve of the backline Gambut-Bardia. Ready for use and present in the combat zone is probably an armored brigade.

The 5th *Indian Division* of Inf. can be considered a Army Reserve; It doesn't have a big combative capacity. A major attack whose protagonists should be armored divisions requires first a concentration and a staging of these units. Evidence of this for now there aren't any. However, they can be disruptive under attacks and episodes exploring for which you don't need a big meeting.

The deployment of Inf. divisions on the defensive, from the use of the 7th Armored Division for exploration and security, by the fact that the bulk of the 1st Armored Division was brought back and the lack of powerful reserves, we can deduce that the British Command does not intend to carry out a major attack soon. To defend against an *Italian-German attack* on the British Command the following possibilities:

a) to search with the same operations to slow down the advancing German-Italian and finally stop it completely. To do this you need a strong deployment of forces in depth. Such an arrangement requires- especially in consideration

the necessary moving supplies-long term. For now it is not possible to recognize the application of these resolutions. After or just before the start of the attack, such a deployment could be possible only at the cost of losing the bulk of supplies.

b) all-out Defense falling back on the Fort of Tobruk. To that end the divisions of Inf. under the protection of field fortifications and mine would occupy the positions once again. Only in extreme cases they would go out from Tobruk with the right wing to settle back to defense on the line El Gobi-Tobruk. The armored divisions assume the mobile defense. Armored forces for that purpose should be held ready to counter-attack roughly in the North-East of Bir Hakeim. The attack signal, when the opponent has over spent the mine barrages or bypassed them.

The armored units can also, leaving the enemy units of Inf., Recon and A/T move East and Southeast-roughly in the area around Bir el Gobi-attack of the enemy on the flank.

The latest decision by the command requires a lot of good disposition to take responsibility, and make the action established a great possibility to change decisions depending on the situation. From the experience gained so far, the enemy is not prone to such decisions.

Therefore we will be closer to just expecting that he will give preference to another possibility, keep ready to counter-attack armored forces behind the line Bir Hakeim-Bir el Hamat.

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USSME Note: the annexes have been omitted because of relevance.

*Secret*

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE ARMORED ARMY AFRICA.

*Command:*

combat unit with 1 co./I Bn. A/A./43<sup>rd</sup> regt.;  
612<sup>th</sup> bn. A/A (without 4th co.);  
10<sup>th</sup> regt. Army connections;  
Commander of army supplies.

*90th Light Division:*

I and II Bn./200<sup>th</sup> regt. Inf. Lt. (without command regt.)  
361<sup>st</sup> regt. Inf. Lt.,  
1<sup>st</sup> pl./900<sup>o</sup> bn. Engineers;

*Army troops assigned:*

288th Special Unit, 2nd Bn./408th regt. art.  
606th Bn. A/A.,  
605th Bn.. A/T.,  
2 Bty/I Bn. A/A./18th regt. art.,  
I Fleet 621st co. r. t interception;  
also 3rd rep. Recon.

Note: 707th and 708th co. infantry guns will inflow the day x + 1 by A.C.A Command.

*German Africa Corps (C.T.A):*

15<sup>th</sup> Armored Division;  
21<sup>st</sup> Armored Division without 3<sup>rd</sup> Recon Bn.;  
Corp's troops;  
Army troops assigned:  
4<sup>th</sup> and sa Bn./115<sup>th</sup> regt. art.,  
command 135<sup>th</sup> regt. A/A.,  
617<sup>th</sup> gr. A/A  
I gr. A/A./18<sup>th</sup> regt, without 2nd btr.  
I gr. A/A./43<sup>rd</sup> regt. without 3a btr.  
I pl. /621st Co. interception r. t.

*XX Army Corps:*

*Armored Division "Ariete";*  
*Motorized Division "Trieste",.*  
*Army Corp's troops;*  
*Army troops assigned:*

CXLVII gr. art. Hvy. (2 btr.),  
CXXXI gr. art. Hvy. (2 btr.),  
II Gr. 24<sup>th</sup> regt. art.;  
V Gr./1st regt. art.,  
Commander of Engineers: Col. Raffaelli,  
1st cp./XXVII Assult bn.,  
90th co. Assult (mot.)

*X Army Corps:*

“Brescia” Division (without V gr./I° regt art.);  
“Pavia” Division,  
Army Corps troops

*XXI Army Corps:*

“Trento” Division;  
“Sabratha” Division;  
Army Corps troops  
II/24<sup>th</sup> regt, Art.  
..../XXVII Assault bn;  
*command 15th Infantry Brigade:*  
200th Lt. Inf. regt (without 708th Hv. Inf. gun co.),  
361st Lt. Inf. regt,  
442/612th bn. A/A,  
1st Plt 900th Engineers Bn.,  
1st mixed links/10th plt. regt links Army Corps;  
also: 2 plt. Smoke engineers

*Command 104th artillery:*

Command 221st regt Art;  
408th gr. heavy Art without 2 bty;  
II gr. 115th regt heavy Art without 4th and 5th bty;  
523rd gr. coastal Art (2 bty);  
526th gr. coastal Art (2 bty);  
533rd gr. coastal Art (2 bty);  
902nd bty heavy;  
4th bty heavy/149th regt Art;  
364th btr;  
11th gr. observation;  
II gr. A/A 25th regt. (1 bty light, 1 bty heavy)

*Italian artillery command (Gen. Nicolini):*

Command 8th art. Rgt.;  
XXXIII gr Art Hvy (3 bty);  
LII gr. Art Hvy (2 bty)

*Colonel Hecker column:*

Commander Engineers A.C.A. command;  
13th cp./800th regt special;  
778th cp. landing Engineers;  
landing bn. «San. Marco»;  
3 Tanks of war booty;  
3 self propelled tanks;  
1 squad 10th regt. army links

COMAND ARMOR ARMY “AFRIKA”

Secret

1/a, no. 50/42

Q, G. May 20, 1942

*The order of the army for the attack*

1: 250.00 cards; 1: 100,000; also 1: 50,000 and 1: 25,000 of Tobruk

1st - enemy: see the opposing situation (annex No. 1) (1).

2nd - The tank army «Afrika» (see order of battle App. No. 2) (2) destroy the British operating army deployed at Bir Hakeim-El Adem- Acroma -Ain el Gazala, fascinate and finally the fort of Tobruk. To that end, beginning at 14 hours/day X, the X and XXI Corp. attack head-on towards Got el Mehata-Ain el Gazala, while the motorized units of the Army (90th Light Inf. Div., C. T. A., the XX Corp.), moving in the night from day X day X + 1 above Bir Hakeim to the South and attack the enemy, on the reverse, the day X + 1, between the coast and the Trigh Capuzzo. The tactical grouping Hecker, landing on the night of day X + 1 X + 2 per day at Gabr Sidi Hamuda, blocking the via Balbia to the height of km. 136. ensure the rear recon Forces of the army in the El Adem area.

The day X will be notified the night before.

Grid, attack routes and objectives, see slide attachment No. 3 [omitted].

3<sup>rd</sup> -90th Lt. Inf. Div. move from the starting point to (see annex) [omitted] through the zone B on El Adem, will occupy the area C. and, leaving safety there and East of El Adem, held ready, moving behind special order Northwest, to attack the enemy at the rear between the coast and Acroma, and to occupy the area D.

To that end, the Division will:

-moving at day 9 X from current positions, leaving in place strong rearguards and moving west of the Division «Trieste» through the North Signal, the departure zone for 18 hours;

-moving the X + 1 day at 04:30 after new supply from area B on the marked, at 08.30 hours the area c. It will occupy the airport El Adem blocked roads and trails that run through this area. The important thing is that the Division with a rapid advance and without being pulled by the enemy, to reach soon the area C.

Exploring forces of the Division must, while driving at night, especially during the advance to Bir Hacheim at El Adem, protecting the southern and eastern flank of the army. From zone C shall be carried out on wide exploration across towards Sidi Rezegh the Trigh Capuzzo and Baldia eastward.

4<sup>th</sup> The Corp. from the starting point to (see transparency) [omitted] initially reach the area south of Bir Hakeim (area B), so stick with the left wing over Bir Hakeim and advancing on the marked, will reach the area C. The Corp will be held ready to attack behind special order so the enemy to the back.

For this purpose the Corp will:

- moving at 15:00 hours of the day from the southern sector of the X positions, for 19:00 hours starting area A;
- 21:00 moving from the starting area with full supply for 3 hours of the day X + 1, area B;
- moving day 4.30 p.m. X + 1, after a new supply, for 12 hours the zone C (8.30 a.m. must be exceeded the line Haduret el Chescausc Bir el- Harmat).

The enemy that was located in the area of Bir Hacheim, must be attacked and beaten.

(1) See. Annex 1

(2) See. Annex 2

Corp Recon forces, during the entire advance, skirting the right wing, must keep the connection with the 90th Light Infantry Division. A tank battalion of the Corp, exiting at day 14:00 X northern sector current positions, must support the right wing attack of XXI Corp. (see no. 7). The Bn. At 19:00 must be withdrawn from the Corp.

5<sup>th</sup> - XX Corp., moving at 14:00 of the day X, will occupy the area (see transparency) [omitted] and proceeding with internal motorized units wings will reach first the B zone. The Corp will bend North and advancing pass Bir Belafarit on the marked routes, will reach the area C. Here be held ready to attack behind special order the overleaf of the enemy in Directorate-General Carmuset el Regem, moving directly towards the Northwest.

For this purpose the body will:

- moving at 14:00 day X from the current positions for 19:00 hours in the area.
- moving at 21:00, with full supply, from zone A, for 02:00 hours of day X + 1, area B;
- moving at 05:00 X + 1 day, after a new supply, for 12 hours the zone C (8.30 p.m. must be exceeded the Trigh el Abd on Bir Belafarit).

One part of the body (a tank Bn. and a recon group), moving at 14:00 X day, must support the attack of the left wing of X Corp. (see. “*Brescia*”) (see no. 6). These units must again be withdrawn from the Corp at 19:00.

Corp Recon forces at 4.30 X + 1 day, must advance from Eluet el Usceica area northwards in order to give security to the left of the motorized units of the enemy between the XX and X Corp. southward.

*Addition to n. 3rd and 5th.*

In the event that the situation at the evening of day X requires an additional motorized units move towards the South and East after the movement of Zone A force the hypothesis “Venezia”. It will be communicated with the conventional Word « Venezia ». The map of the movements to be made in the « Venice » (all. Ia), is transmitted separately to the 90th Light. div. of infantry; the C. T. A., the XX Corp., the X and commander of aviation « Afrika ».

6th-The X Corp. at 14:00 of X day move to attack North of Trigh Enver Bey, repel enemy recon forces which are in the adversaries security zone and for the evening must have occupied the line in annex 3 [omitted].

Will support action in the afternoon of the XX Corp. units (a Tank Bn. and a Recon group) (see # 5).

The necessary arrangements must be made with the command of the XX Corps.

After achieved the goals of the day the Corp will line up in defense for the night arraigned a strong point of battalions organized in chessboard.

It is recommended, especially to bring in a good amount of bags (each man about 15), mines and barbed wire.

During the night, with continuous movement of lorries in the vicinity of the line you will have to simulate a massing armored forces ready to attack.

The Corp will continue the attack at 04:30 X + 1 day and noon should have certain links with the West Wing of the XX Corp. Since X + 1 to the Corp falls the responsibility of protecting the South flank of the army.

7th-XXI Corp. at 14:00 day X move the attack between Sidi Breghisc and the coast and for the evening must have reached after recon forces expelled enemies that are in the security zone, established line opposing in annex 3 [omitted]. Will support in the afternoon the Corp a Tank Bn. of the C. T. A. (see no. 4). The necessary arrangements shall be made under the leadership of C. T. A.

After achieved the goals of the day the Corp will line up in defense for the night taking just a strong point of battalion prepared in chessboard.

It is recommended, especially to bring in a good amount of bags (each man about 15), mines and barbed wire.

Overnight with continuous movement of captured tanks and lorries in the vicinity-especially in the area directly south of the via Balbia and North of Sidi-Breghisc will have to simulate a massing of numerous armored forces ready to attack.

The Corp will continue the attack to 04:30 X + 1 day and engage confronting enemy forces with South and North wings. In the subsequent development of the attack and, above all, must quickly open the Ain el Gazala, and clearing out mines quickly the via Balbia.

In the morning of day X + 1 must be used means of a smoke screen East of Temrad and Baldia.

8th The *Hecker battle grouping* from 03:00 of X + 1 day will be held ready, in the Gulf of Bomba, to embark on an hour to conventional message transmitted by radio “Hecker ...” followed by number 6 of which the first two digits indicate the day and the other four for the hour) and to land at Gabr Sidi Hameida. The movement will be protected by light warships and airpower.

After landing at Gabr Sidi Hameida the Hecker tactical grouping must point to the South and with the blockage of the via Balbia preventing the escape of the enemy to the East. Time must be taken with the radio link 90<sup>th</sup> Light infantry division.

9th-*Special provisions for recon* ... see annex No. 4 [omitted].

10th- *The commander of the 104 artillery and Commander Italian artillery Nicolini*, 14:00 of the day X will support with the artillery of the Italian and German Army. (deployed in groups 5 see.

attachment. 3) the attack of the X and XXI Corp. with barrage to neutralize enemies observersm enemy batteries and known centers of resistance. During the advance of the infantry divisions, the artillery of the army must be kept under the

line. Therefore you must make suitable arrangements to ensure a quick change of position especially for little mobile. In the night from day X day X + 1 must be continued artillery action. The interdiction fire must above all be concentrated in the area at the North of Mteifel es Sighir and Balbia East of Ain el Gazala. It is also necessary with the use of the artillery corps in the night from day X day X + 1 arouse the impression of an impending large attack in the XXI Corp.

On X + 1 day the army artillery 4.30 a.m. must support the continued onslaught of X and XXI Corp. In the further development of this attack is especially necessary to concentrate fire on the break points of the infantry. It must be possible for the army artillery Group (deployed further South) to intervene with flanking action, on the XX Corp.

For the approval and distribution of the objectives should be to taken time connection with aviation Commander “Afrika” and must always be maintained.

All the artillery, Corps and divisional Corp, must ensure that the infantry has always supported by artillery fire. It is therefore necessary that artillery observers advance with the first infantry units and can achieve in a short time on a particular goal a concentration of artillery fire, of the Army of the Corp and the divisional.

For with regard to limited supplies of ammunition, X must be fired only one half of the equipment.

The 104 artillery commander and General Nadeem to simplify the command action must dislocate their tactical places together.

*Fire plan* for the artillery of the Italian and German Army in X and XXI Corp. per day X, see attachment 5 [omitted]. The second group 25<sup>th</sup> Reg. Corp. of the 104 artillery commander must be kept ready in Bir Temrad area for mobile use.

11th-*Our airpower* during the X and X + 1, with numerous forces counter battery the enemy air forces and, as long as possible, protection on cruises will our troops, particularly on the motorized divisions. The airpower is asked to support directly the day X and X + 1 day the army operations as follows:

a) 9 a.m. after x: disorder action on the enemy in the South-East and East of South. After the start-up of the 90th Light Division in zone A, throwing of mines at “Termos” for thickening of the minefield at Bir Tengeder- Segnali Sud.

b) from 14:00 of X day: attacks with successive waves against the enemy at North of Trigh Enver Bey with gravity on point at the South area of Ain el Gazala. Also paralyzing any withdrawal of the enemy from Ain el Gazala to Acroma-Tobruk.

c) From 22:00 of day X and during the night: continuous attacks on the railway and on the road fighter cruises Tobruk-Ain el Gazala & the Axis road. The enemy bombs attacks on the *uidian* at the South and South-East of Ain el Gazala.

d) at dusk attacks with illumination and incendiary bombs on Bir Hacheim in order to indicate the road to motorized divisions.

e) 4 p.m. of the day X + 1 on attack road house of Gambut.



j) from 06:00 of X + 1 day: continuation of attacks against the enemy in the area at the South of Ain el Gazala and paralyzing the retreat by Gazala eastward. Also the paralyzing the flow of any enemy reinforcements Trigh el Abd on East of El Adem and the via Balbia.

Additional tasks and details about the delimitation of the areas between the German and the Italian Aviation are set aside.

Further use of air units for direct support to land operations will be required from time to time by the command of the army.

Special provisions for support of airpower and the recognition service, see annex No. 6 [omitted].

12th-*transmission of news*. The dependant commands directs *every two hours, without being required* to transmit news on the situation. Must be communicated the line reached and places of the divisions. We must also communicate whether in time referred to has not happened or substantial change in the situation. The Corps commands etc. must transmit, as so far, *the news in the morning and evening*.

At commands there shall be an officer of the particular task with the G.S. timely transmission of news.

The orders of the army “Afrika” or refer to the map 1:250,000 or 1:100,000; later that 1:50,000 of Tobruk. In conveying the news dependant commands should therefore also refer to these maps. From 09:00 of day X enters into force line of impact referred to in *annex No. 7* [omitted].

13th-*Maintenance of secrecy*. The maintenance of secrecy on our offensive intention is decisive importance for the success of the operations. Every successful compromises and improvidence can cost the lives of many soldiers. Should not happen again that, like in last autumn, the enemy becomes aware of the attack as well as its date.

I therefore urge the Sirs. Commanding General, Commander Nicolini, the Commander of that army links within their commands require draconian means to maintain the secrecy and the certainty of the secret. To these belong:

- a) strict control radio traffic and telephone;
- b) limit notices to dependant commanders what they must know *in order to carry out* the task assigned to them, so they must be sent from time to time individual orders by relay and they should *not* contain information on the *overall situation*

All orders and special provisions must be expressly designated as orders for the defensive.

The maintenance of secrecy must be constant thought of all the commanders and officers of the G.S.. The circle of people you should be initiated to the secrets of the overall situation must be limited as much as possible. The officers in question I must be reported to for 24-5 by name.

The aviation Commander “Afrika” please want to apply similar provisions in his field.

14th-*Special provisions for the use of engineering units*, see appendix. 8 [omitted].

*15th-Special provisions for the supply of German troops* see annex 9 [omitted].

*16th -Special provisions with the links* see annex 10 [omitted].

*17th-tactical Command of the army* from 14:00 hours of day X: El Cherima. During the attack of the motorized units I'll move with a small circle of offices along the direction of the *C. T .A.*

*The Commander in Chief*

Rommel

*Colonel General*

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE AXIS FORCES  
as of the date of May 24, 1942

COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES N.A.

Supreme Commander: Gen. Ettore Bastico  
Chief of staff: Gen. Curio Barbasetti di Prun  
Sub-Chief of staff: Gen. Emilio Giglioli

COMANDO SUPERIORE ROYAL CARABINIERI

Commander: Gen. Raffaele Castriota

COMANDO SUPERIORE ARTILLERY

Commander: Gen. Ettore Manca di Mores  
dependent units:  
8<sup>th</sup> Group Army artillery (off base),  
37<sup>th</sup> Group A/A battery compartment of 20 mm  
50<sup>th</sup> Group position A/A.  
51<sup>st</sup> Group position A/A

COMANDO SUPERIORE ENGINEERS

Commander: Gen. Luigi Grosso  
dependent units:  
2<sup>nd</sup> grouping special engineers  
7<sup>th</sup> grouping special engineers  
XXXI sappers battalion (assigned to X Corps)  
workers grouping  
232<sup>nd</sup> mixed auto unit  
rail service engineering company  
four companies militarized civilian workers  
workers companies L

INTENDENZA NORTH AFRICA

Intendente: Col. Victor Palma  
General Staff  
Headquarters  
Intendenza delegation Tripolitania  
Intendenza delegation Cyrenaica  
Directorate of Sanitation with:  
20<sup>th</sup> stock health and veterinary medicine  
one part of health warehouse  
six reserve hospitals  
two convalescent homes  
18 field hospitals  
seven field hospitals without materials  
eight field hospitals in preparation

- Eleven surgical nuclei
- Seven ambulances radiological
- four ambulances dental,
- two sections gas remediation
- two sections disinfection

Catering management with:

- 20<sup>th</sup> Special warehouse V.A.
- 20<sup>th</sup> Special warehouse F. P. L.
- with five mixed parts V. A. F. P. L.
- 21<sup>st</sup> special warehouse V.A.
- with four mixed parts V. A. F. P. L.
- 20<sup>th</sup> warehouse V.E. with two fractions
- 21<sup>st</sup> inventory V.E.
- four autonomous supplies stores
- ten food warehouses guards
- three food distribution places
- three food distribution places
- a main military bakery
- three sections with Weiss bakers ovens
- two sections with bakers ovens carts
- seven teams bakers
- a main barracks warehouse
- two barracks branches
- one Subsistence company

Artillery Directorate with:

- 20<sup>th</sup> artillery magazine with three parts
- thirteen ammunition depots

Directorate of engineers with:

- 20<sup>th</sup> engineering materials warehouse
- three workshops of the engineering
- one company assault engineers

Administration directorate with:

- six military crates

Directorate of chemical service with:

- 20<sup>th</sup> chemical warehouse with a special fraction
- Special liquids storage

Directorate of Horse and veterinary management with:

- a sickbay quadrupeds
- a quadruped supply section and haulage

Transport Directorate:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Truck Regiment with four heavy truck groups
- three commissions of movement
- XII battalion road movement
- two offices boarding and landings
- one section boarding and landings
- two port companies

Automotive service management with:

- 20<sup>th</sup> Special car park
- 21<sup>st</sup> Special car park with a part

2<sup>nd</sup> car park of the army  
5<sup>th</sup> car park of the army with a part

Postal service Directorate with:

two offices of concentration camp postal  
four Military Post offices

Directorate checkpoints

Fourteen checkpoints controls  
two concentration camps prisoners of war  
three parking fields POWs  
one company P.A.I. port  
225<sup>th</sup> battalion T. M.  
226<sup>th</sup> battalion T. M.

COMANDO SUPERIORE DEPENDENT UNITS:

INFANTRY DIVISION *LITTORIO* (133rd) (Gen. Gervasio Bitossi) with:

General Staff  
Headquarters  
12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri Regiment with three battalions.  
133<sup>rd</sup> tank regiment with two battalions M tanks  
133<sup>rd</sup> artillery regiment with one group of 75/27  
XXXIII mixed engineer battalion  
Services

INFANTRY DIVISION «BOLOGNA» (25<sup>th</sup>) (Gen. Alessandro Gloria) with:

General Staff  
Headquarters  
39<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment with two battalions  
40<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment with two battalions  
205<sup>th</sup> artillery regiment with one group of 100/17 and three groups of 75/28  
XXV mixed engineer battalion  
Services

VARIOUS UNITS:

Regiment *Giovani Fascisti* with two battalions GG. FF. and IV battalion anti-tank grenadier

Regiment quick A.S.  
IX infantry battalion  
291<sup>st</sup>. g.a.f group of 77/28  
332<sup>nd</sup>. g.a.f group of 100/17  
12th Truck regiment  
*San Marco* battalion

TRIPOLITANIA DEFENSE COMMAND (Gen. Armando) with:

Tripoli Fortress with:

one group CC. RR.  
330<sup>th</sup> g.a.f machine Gunners battalion.  
340<sup>th</sup> g.a.f machine Gunners battalion.

350<sup>th</sup> g.a.f machine Gunners battalion.  
 291<sup>st</sup> g.a.f group of 77/28  
 335<sup>th</sup> g.a.f group of 149/12  
 345<sup>th</sup> g.a.f group of 120/25  
 353<sup>rd</sup> g.a.f group of 120/25  
 XXXIV engineer battalion  
 I and V CC.NN. battalion  
 V Libyan battalion  
 Libyan engineers battalion  
 two companies Libyan position  
 two companies Libyan position  
 30<sup>th</sup> coastal artillery grouping and A/A.  
 31<sup>st</sup> artillery group A/A  
 34<sup>th</sup> coastal artillery group

Garian sector with:

I Libyan battalion  
 five Libyan companies position  
 290<sup>th</sup> g.a.f artillery group.  
 one squadron savari\*  
 one garrison company  
 one engineer nuclei

Zuara Sector with:

XXVII sector g.a.f.  
 III Libyan battalion  
 II squadrons group savari  
 four Libyan companies by location  
 280th g.a.f artillery group.  
 one garrison company  
 one engineer nuclei

Homs sector with:

I squadrons group spahis\*\*  
 XXV battalions machine Gunners  
 IV Libyan battalion  
 VI CC.NN battalion.  
 one Libyan position company  
 34<sup>th</sup> coastal artillery group  
 52<sup>nd</sup> position group of 20 mm.  
 two garrison companies

LIBYAN SAHARA COMMAND (Gen. Alberto Mannerini) with:

Hon sector with:

LV autonomous infantry battalion  
 two Saharan companies  
 three Libyan companies position  
 one company 47/32 guns  
 two batteries from 77/28  
 four Saharan batteries  
 one company mixed engineer

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\*Spavari = Native Libyan Cavalry

\* spahis also native Calvary

Ghat sector with:

- Camel company of Fezzan
- a Libyan position company

Sebha sector with:

- four Saharan companies
- three companies of Sciati camels
- three position Libyan companies
- two batteries of 77/28
- a Saharan battery

5<sup>th</sup> AIR FLEET (Gen. Vittorio Marquises)

EAST SECTOR (Gen. D' Aurelio) with:

1<sup>st</sup> Stormo with:

- 6<sup>th</sup> fighter Group (Mc. 202)
- 17<sup>th</sup> fighter Group (Mc. 202)

2<sup>nd</sup> Stormo with:

- 3<sup>rd</sup> fighter Group (CR 42)
- 8<sup>th</sup> fighter Group (Mc 200)
- 13<sup>th</sup> fighter group (Mc. 200)
- 150<sup>th</sup> fighter group (Mc. 200)

4<sup>th</sup> Stormo with:

- 9<sup>th</sup> fighter Group (Mc. 202)
- 10<sup>th</sup> fighter Group (Mc. 202)

35<sup>th</sup> Stormo with:

- 86<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group (Cant. Z. 1007)
- 95<sup>th</sup> Bomber group. (Cant Z. 1007)

50<sup>th</sup> Stormo with:

- 156<sup>th</sup> assault Group (CR 42)
- 159<sup>th</sup> assault Group (CR 42)

131<sup>st</sup> torpedo Bomber group

131st torpedo Bomber group

174th and 176<sup>th</sup> Squadron R.S. T.

69<sup>th</sup> O.A. Group (Ca. 311)

196<sup>th</sup> R.M. Squadron (Cant. Z. 501)

WEST (Gen. Baldacchino) with:

12<sup>th</sup> fighter Group (G. 50)

160<sup>th</sup> fighter Group (CR. 42)

175<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron R.S. T.

1<sup>st</sup> group A. P. C.

614<sup>th</sup> rescue Squadron

145<sup>th</sup> T (Transport) Group

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA AVIATION with:

26th Squadron sub-Saharan Africa (Ghibli)

99th Squadron sub-Saharan Africa (Ghibli)

103rd Squadron sub-Saharan Africa (Ghibli)

NAVAL COMANDO SUPERIORE (Adm. Giuseppe Lombardi)

NAVY COMMAND TRIPOLI with:

- 40<sup>th</sup> Mine Sweeper fleet
- use local ships group
- auxiliary ships Libyan cabotage group
- R. Harbormaster
- 10<sup>th</sup> Legion Libyan Milmar
- 12<sup>th</sup> anti-submarine group

NAVY COMMAND BENGHAZI with:

- 41<sup>st</sup> Mine Sweeper fleet
- R. Harbormaster

3<sup>rd</sup> group on torpedo boats:

- Torpedo boat *Prestinari*
- Torpedo boat *Cantore*
- Torpedo boat *Cascino*
- Torpedo boat *Montanari*

13<sup>th</sup> torpedo boat squadron with:

- Torpedo boat *Circe*
- Torpedo boat *Clio*
- Torpedo boat *Calliope*
- Torpedo boat *Perseo*

- R. gunboat *Scilla*
- Tanker *Tanaro*
- Tug *Ciclope*
- Aircraft rescue ship *Laurana*

German units:

- 6<sup>th</sup> Squadron Mas
- Minesweeper

ARMORED ARMY “AFRICA” (PANZERARMEE AFRIKA) (Gen. Erwin Rommel)

COMMAND

- X Corps (Gen. Benvenuto Gioda) with:
  - Artillery command
  - Engineer command
  - Headquarters

INFANTRY DIVISION *PAVIA* (27th) (Gen. Giacomo Lombardi) with:

- General Staff
- Headquarters
- 19<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment with three battalions
- 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment with three battalions



1<sup>st</sup> Quick artillery regiment (1)  
XXVII mixed Engineer battalion  
Engineer

INFANTRY DIVISION, *PAVIA* (17<sup>th</sup>) (Gen. Arturo Torriani):

General Staff  
Headquarters  
27<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment with three battalions  
28<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment with three battalions  
26<sup>th</sup> artillery regiment (2)  
XVII mixed Engineer battalion  
Services

TROOPS OF THE ARMY CORP

9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri regiment with two battalions  
16<sup>th</sup> artillery Group of the Army Corp (3)  
X Assault Engineer battalion  
X links Engineer battalion  
Services

XXI Corps (Gen. Enea Navarini):

Command  
Artillery command  
Artillery command  
Engineer command  
Headquarters

INFANTRY DIVISION *TRENTO* (102<sup>nd</sup>) (gen. Carlo Gotti):

General Staff  
Headquarters  
61<sup>st</sup> infantry regiment with three battalions  
62<sup>nd</sup> infantry regiment with three battalions  
46<sup>th</sup> artillery regiment (3)  
LI Mixed Engineer battalion  
services

INFANTRY DIVISION *SABRATHA* (60<sup>th</sup>) (Gen. Mario Soldarelli):

General Staff  
Headquarters  
85<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment with two battalions  
86<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment with two battalions  
3rd fast artillery regiment (4)  
services

15th BRIGADE *SCHUETZEN* (Col. Erwin Menny) with:

200<sup>th</sup> rifle regiment with two battalions  
361<sup>st</sup> rifle regiment with two battalions  
528<sup>th</sup> artillery Group (one battery)  
535th artillery group  
minor units

TROOPS OF THE ARMY CORP

7th Bersaglieri Regiment with two battalions  
XXVII battalion assault Engineer  
LXV Engineer links battalion  
XXXIII sappers battalion  
14th Assault company  
Services

XX Corps (Gen. Hector Balthazar) with:  
Artillery command  
Engineer command  
Headquarters

MOTORISED DIVISION *TRIESTE* (103rd) (Gen. Arnaldo Azzi):

General Staff  
Headquarters  
65<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment with two battalions  
66<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment with two battalions  
21<sup>st</sup> artillery regiment (5)  
VIII Bersaglieri battalion armored cars  
XI tank battalion  
CXXXI artillery group of 149/28  
CXLVII/8th Corps artillery from 149/28  
LII mixed Engineer battalion  
services

ARMOURED DIVISION *ARIETE* (132<sup>nd</sup>) (Gen. Giuseppe De Stefanis) with:

General Staff  
Headquarters  
8<sup>th</sup> tank regiment with three battalions  
132<sup>nd</sup> artillery regiment (6)  
132<sup>nd</sup> tank regiment with three battalions M tanks  
Group III tanks L. 6 *Lancieri di Novara*  
Group III Armored cars *Nizza Cavalleria*  
II/24<sup>o</sup> artillery regiment A/A 105/28  
DLI semoventi group with 75/18  
DLII group semoventi with 75/18  
V/1o artillery A/A and A/T of 88/56  
XXXII mixed Engineer battalion  
services

TROOPS OF THE ARMY CORP

CLXII/8<sup>th</sup> artillery Army Corps Regiment of 149/28  
XXXIV battalion special Engineers  
services

*DEUTSCHES AFRIKAKORPS* (Gen. Walther Nehring) with:

Command

Headquarters

15<sup>th</sup> *PANZERDIVISION* (Gen. Gustav von Vaerst):

General Staff

Headquarters

115<sup>th</sup> rifle regiment with two battalions

8<sup>th</sup> Tank Regiment with two battalions

33<sup>rd</sup> Recon battalions

33<sup>rd</sup> *Panzerjaeger* group

33<sup>rd</sup> artillery regiment

33<sup>rd</sup> pioneer battalions

72<sup>nd</sup> links battalion

services

21<sup>st</sup> *Panzerdivision* (Gen. Georg von Bismarck):

General Staff

Headquarters

104<sup>th</sup> rifle regiment with two battalions

5<sup>th</sup> Tank Regiment with two battalions

39<sup>th</sup> *Panzerjaeger* group

155<sup>th</sup> artillery regiment

200<sup>th</sup> links battalion

services

#### TROOPS OF THE ARMY CORPS

Command 135<sup>th</sup> artillery regiment A/A

617<sup>th</sup> Hvy. Field. artillery group

1/18<sup>th</sup> A/A artillery

1/43<sup>rd</sup> A/A artillery

two batteries of

II/115<sup>th</sup> artillery with mortars from 210 mm.

minor units and services

90th LIGHT DIVISION (Gen. Ulrich Kleeman) with:

General Staff

Headquarters

288<sup>th</sup> special unit

3<sup>rd</sup> recon. Battalion

58<sup>th</sup> recon. Battalion

606<sup>th</sup> *Panzerjaeger* group

minor units.

Services

#### TROOPS AND SERVICES OF THE ARMY:

104<sup>TH</sup> ARTILLERY COMMAND with:

Command 221<sup>st</sup> artillery regiment (7)

408<sup>th</sup> Group of 100 guns (one battery)

149<sup>th</sup> Group of 170 guns (one battery)

528<sup>th</sup> group guns of 150 (two batteries)  
533<sup>rd</sup> howitzers group of 150  
523<sup>rd</sup> group guns of 150 (two batteries)  
II/115<sup>th</sup> mortars of 210 (one battery)  
one battery of 170 and one of 76.2

ITALIAN ARTILLERY COMMAND (Gen. Nicolini)

Command 8<sup>th</sup> group artillery of the Army  
XXXIII/8<sup>th</sup> artillery of 149/40  
LII/8<sup>th</sup> artillery of 152/37  
10<sup>th</sup> Regiment links of the Army  
556<sup>th</sup> command of the rear with various units  
585<sup>th</sup> Truck Regiment with five German truck columns and Italian two heavy truck units  
Various units

- (1) with two groups of 100/17, two of 75/27 and one of 88/55.
- (2) with two groups of 105/28.
- (3) with two groups of 100/17 and two of 75/27.
- (4) with a group of 100/17 and two of 75/27.
- (5) with two groups of 100/17, two of 75/27 and one of 75/50.
- (6) with two groups of 75/27, one of 105/28 and one of 90/53.
- (7) In fact, the deployment of the German artillery was characterized by plural caliber formations. So acted the groups II/115<sup>th</sup>, 408<sup>th</sup>, 528<sup>th</sup>, and 533<sup>rd</sup> with their batteries and others..

COMANDO SUPREMO

At Comando Superiore Armed Forces N.A.

No. 31090/Op. (.) For Excellence Bastico (.)

June 6, 1942

Duce agreed on the outline you communicated that correspond in maxim to the framework proposed by this Comando Supremo the 2<sup>nd</sup> current with his 31045 (.) So (:) implement every means to weaken armored forces (,) to fraying our minimum and preserving our earth as much as possible collection (,) 2<sup>nd</sup> - To aim for the fall of the front of Ain el Gazala (.) 3<sup>rd</sup> -The elimination of Bir Hacheim can also provide opportunity to give severe blow at part of the enemy mobile forces (:) this action must not drag on over time otherwise obscure our & main action would lead us to those time limits of attrition to which have the enemy's interest to lead (,) 4<sup>th</sup> -It is noted the particular situation that our X Corp. & XXI Corp. bravely face (:) your General operative disposition & special providences that this Command must have taken prevent any surprise (,) 5<sup>th</sup> -The Comando Supremo (,) while is pleased to ascertain the identity of evaluation of intentions & (,) follows with absolute trust in & commands troops in the (,) the stages of the battle (.)

CAVALLERO  
14350606

Appendix no. 17

COMANDO SUPREMO  
THE HEAD OF THE G.S. GENERAL

June 9, 1942 –XX

## MEMO FOR THE DUCE

Allow me, Duce, to summarize the business development, the latest events in Cyrenaica and the resulting situation which you have examined the same day to day and which is also the last communications that the Supreme Command resulted from Superasi.

The offensive operation in Cyrenaica was conceived as rapid mass action tending to wrap and beat the opposing forces deployed to the west of Tobruk, then to turn on the fort, after annihilated the British mobile forces,

Rommel thought he could win with expeditious attack.

The Comando Supremo had placed the operation limits:

-*of space*, limiting the reaching of the Libyan-Egyptian border, for strategic and logistical reasons, the exploitation of success in case of a favorable outcome of the operation; in case of non-occupation of Tobruk it was indicated that the deployment to be taken should not cross the line of Ain el Gazala, to prevent a recurrence of the unfavorable deployment with two fronts that had in autumn 1941;

-*of time*, prescribing not extend operations beyond June 20, and not so much for the commitments inherent requirement C 3, as to the difficulty of food logistics operations of longer duration.

It should be noted in this regard that in January Rommel involved in his project, to achieve the conquest of Tobruk in six days from the start of the offensive and had taken two weeks to the operation: he was granted almost double (about four weeks).

The maneuver was carried out according to the plan initially: found heavily guarded Bir Hacheim, Rommel was limited to watching him for not playing into the hands of the opponent, but the masses have escaped armored opponents winding, who could not reach the Via Balbi. While it remained the opponent the free disposal of such road, Rommel saw threatened their communications and, exhausted stocks in tow, had to take the deployment gathered that still retains. Bir Hacheim behind the new line-up, had to be eliminated: a quick attack failed and Rommel had to resort siege by assigning a force corresponding to approximately 2 divisions.

*Operating options in this situation:* those specified in the directives of the Comando Supremo on 2 June (and on which Bastico and Rommel have agreed) and as specified in the telegram of June 6:

- a) the objective for the fall of the front of Ain el Gazala;
- b) the elimination of Bir Hacheim can also provide opportunity to give severe blow at part of opposing mobile forces; This action must not drag on over time otherwise paralyze our main action and would lead to such limitations of time and wear and tear to which the enemy has every interest to lead us."

At the present state of things, while Bir Hacheim continues to be the basic prerequisite for any operation, there is no evidence that such locations can quickly fall (and this resistance also gives an idea of what would encounter an expeditious Tobruk attack).

It is therefore clearly the face of danger, repeatedly pointed out that the action degenerate into attrition. Already, the losses incurred in the most important means of struggle can be evaluated, according to reports of Bastico and Rommel, about 50%; ammunition is scarce, reserve men exhausted. The factor of physical resistance is common to us and the enemy, but the enemy is certainly also aided in this respect by the effect moral of the inflow of reinforcements, which may also allow replacement of units on the line.

It is clear that in such conditions a share of attrition can not be addressed because the normal inflows from the Motherland can write off normal consumption, but not those of the extraordinary battle.

I have a duty, DUCE, to represent you this situation, when the influx of reinforcements confirmed by the opponent becomes necessary to consider the possibility of a significant extension of the struggle perhaps even more on the initiative than our opponent.

It was willing but the approach of *Littorio*: I must, however, there represent to you DUCE that this unit is inefficient: only two tank battalions and poorly trained (because it was the only trained at the start of the operations after the Ariete); one artillery group in place of the six organic; without engineers and services units; the only the Bersaglieri regiment is full.

All in all it seems to me, DUCE, that our prospects are limited tactics, not by our will, but for the evidence of the facts, to the achievement of two objectives:

- 1) elimination of Bir Hacheim;
- 2) wins line of Ain el Gazala.

After what seems to me to have to think about re-establish as soon as possible a deployment collected, facing east, with a high capacity counter. It must also, in my view, that the new front is reached in a logistical situation that allows us to continue the fight in these conditions for several weeks.

The outlets of such a process can succeed also very promising, as very profitable have already been tactical results achieved so far.

As for the *Littorio* division seems to me that it should be, at least in the first half, the reserve of the new deployment. It should be noted, among other things, that there is no reserve behind the XXI and X Corps, which have a front of a good 55 kilometers.

Therefore, there is a time limit on the continuation of current operations; limit which I believe will soon be added. Especially when you consider that a further attrition of our armored vehicles would lead us soon into inferiority in front of the enemy.

I do not know what exactly will ask Marshal Kesselring. But with regard to the Comando Supremo, who in your person, DUCE, the total liability of the situation, it is my humble opinion that owing to the exposed promises and above the already happened attrition and advanced stock composition while opponent does bring reinforcements, the time limit that is imposed is not exceeded for the continuation of the action in its present form will soon be reached.

I have not taken into account in the course of these considerations, other elements

Also we must have present and that is that the ongoing battle, absorbing many Italian and German air forces, has negative repercussions for us in regard to the neutralization of Malta, the navigation in the Mediterranean and actions enemy air on southern Italy.

CAVALLERO



COMANDO SUPREMO

At Comando Superiore Armed Forces N.A.

Prot. N. 31139 / OP (.) For Excellence Bastico (.)

June 10, 1942

Marshal Kesselring talks with Duce and myself have highlighted common views about the situation appreciation & course of action to be followed by further actions on the objectives of Bir Hacheim (-) Ain el Gazala & annihilation armored forces with which shock you necessarily produce (.) Kesselring assessed more optimistically consistency of your Axis units involved (,) while agreeing that their data were not updated (.) Kesselring did not insist on the immediate inclusion of Tobruk in the operational program (;) Whereas this objective as possible (.). Ultimately Duce confirms directives 31090 on 6 June & ie (:)  
conquer first phase Bir Hacheim which now combines the two figures of political objective & military (;) to operate after the conquest of the positions of Ain el Gazala (.) The situation is to It is reviewed in connection with achieving these two objectives for any further development (.) Calling your attention to the attrition problem & the problem because new supplies after deployment operations must not see us exhausted (.) Kesselring hinted at an extension operations of four to five days after date 20 (;) Duce has no objection subject to the above conditions (.)

CAVALLERO  
224510

COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES NORTH AFRICA  
OFFICE PROPAGANDA TT. OO.  
The Head Office

P.M. 11/C - 7 June 1942 -XX

Duce!

While it is in full swing the big battle is absolutely premature to draw any conclusions that might be at any moment belied by the very course of events.

What is certain is that General Rommel had made the illusions on the possibility to quickly break the enemy resistance.

In this regard Colonel Heggenreiner gets along by saying that not all the life rings turn out with a hole. The fact is however that the Italian Comando Superiore - as I have said Bastico and Barbasetti-not fail to be present before the action and in due time to the command of the armor of Africa that the company would not have been so easy as the General Rommel believed.

I still these days journey around the deployment of our divisions and in conscience I must declare that the spirit is high and what could be done has been done.

The truth is, and I had failed to say in Rome, that the enemy has opposed a tenacious resistance and has now learned to make war against us on our front where the room for maneuver is limited by the deployment of the forces and the arrangement of the front. It is clear that with an *opponent who has the sea on the left and on the right the desert* maneuver is only possible on the right where he has long been organized to address our attack.

If territorial objectives of great importance have not yet achieved nor is it possible to predict who may be in the subsequent conduct of the battle, however, it is obviously a big goal is to be achieved, namely the destruction of the enemy's armored masses and the weakening of the defensive system the enemy.

If there is nothing to say against the bite of our troops, it is necessary to insist on the urgency of a rotation.

The ongoing battle has already created gaps and others will create in the next few days it is expected that the coming months will be used in the reconstruction of all our units involved in the battle, which is easy to think about the fact that the troops that will be started in route will serve at first as complements to the units most severely affected.

This is easily understood by our troops so that they see every day to increase the difficulties and depart the date of their turnover.

For the responsibility that I have in this particular field I must therefore insist to you because it is addressed and resolved once and for all an issue that becomes more and more difficult as time passes.

It was once said to our troops that after 24 months they had the turnover. It was said then that they would have after 36 months. This limit has been

reduced to 34 but already there are clear reasons why it can not be fully implemented this provision. One of those reasons is the fact that the divisions are worried about losing especially the NCOs for which envisages the need to send to Libya a large number of non-commissioned officers to replace those who have reached the time for the certificates for return. But all this still does not solve the problem.

I had included in the monthly report of April as in the May sent today to SMRE the views expressed by the Commanders of the G. U. on issue of the alternation. They were removed or attenuated by the Comando Superiore which has reserved the right to explain to the commanders themselves the difficulties that hinder the full implementation of the problem.

This does not solve the issue for which I will make known Excellency Cavallero the content of the findings made by the Commanders of G.U because he can take it into account even if the Comando Superiore does not consider the commanders themselves sufficiently oriented on the issue.

It may be that the commanders of G.U. They are not sufficiently oriented, but it is also true that their findings reflect the mood of the troops who are under their orders.

It is worth it in this regard will communicate the thought of a Battalion Commander of the Division "Trento" which puts it this way:

"For the rotation has been established in N.A. a minimum of 36 months of which at least two in line. The measure has not been beneficial to the morale of many elements of the battalion which count already 14 months of uninterrupted stay in line, almost always in contact with the enemy, and they see stray elements, rotations, which of 36 have spent 34 months in the rear or in town where life does not involve the sacrifices of the line. The period of 36 months in the NA, to be able to advocate with the replacement, seems excessive, particularly for those who are part of the departments really operating. Leaving unchanged in term of NA to get the turnover (36 months) would be fair and appropriate that the period spent on the front line was considered double (eg 12 months in line with the effects of the alternation, consider 24 months".

For his part, the Commander of the Division "Trento" says that the idea of spending 34 months in Libya "is considered by soldiers a real exile or not obviously deserved punishment."

Or otherwise express themselves in general all other commanders of G.U.

I have a duty to present to you, Duce, that this situation will become even more serious after this battle for the sacrifices that it requires and because of the hardness of its operation.

Devotedly.  
F .TO MELCHIORRI

COMANDO SUPREMO  
THE DUCE

On, June 21, 1942 –XX

FÜHRER!

The aero-naval battle in the Mediterranean ended with a serious defeat and heavy losses for the enemy; the same is true of transactions in Marmarica, they are going to reach their culmination.

It is my view and certainly you, Fuhrer, that we must consolidate and expand as soon as possible with the results achieved.

At the center of our strategic framework is the issue of Malta, about which we took at the time the notes decisions.

Let me tell you right now that the preparation for the action of Malta is well advanced; operations in Marmarica necessitated to postpone this action until August, what was especially beneficial because in August we will have to complete the means for this purpose were prepared and made, especially the landing craft and other vessels.

This action of Malta imposes more than ever. The effects really substantial share aerial mass conducted by Axis aviation and mainly from II Luftflotte in April extended their effectiveness during May; but now, in June, Malta replenished constantly appliances, has recovered its ability air offensive, so today our navigation for Libya is again made very difficult. Now, to maintain the results achieved in Marmarica and provide for future needs must be able to perform with sufficient certainty the necessary transport.

In support of these demands is the problem of naphtha.

The recent battle Mediterranean prevented two big British convoys to reach Malta. But the output of our naval forces imposed a consumption of about 15,000 tons and has deprived us of the latest availability. Now our warships have empty deposits of oil and you can not supply them; a second output of our naval forces is now not possible and therefore a new attempt to supply Malta we will not oppose a limited action of submarines in addition to the action, not always possible especially for the weather conditions, the torpedo planes.

I did not delay, Führer, to expose in detail the situation of the oil and the related requirements; these figures are known to your experts here with us following the issue with interest equal to ours. I'll just confirm that for the operation of Malta there is a consumption of 40,000 tons of fuel oil and that this should come at least a week before the end of July, because during the last two weeks before the action of the transport will be engaged for troops, which must flow at the last moment.

A reserve of 30,000 tons is also required by our Navy to address the needs of ships, especially the likely needs to release the naval forces

facing opponents attempts like the one today is in progress and in which I mentioned above.

Let me add, however, Führer, that this operation of Malta will be the best way to solve the problem of oil in respect of the Mediterranean, since, outside Malta, all consumption will decrease automatically to an extent that is not possible today to define, but it will certainly be remarkable. I think, the transaction, this problem of fuel oil will be reviewed by our experts to come to definitive conclusions.

I also feel fair to add that August is the time last year that allows to perform the operation on Malta; after which the unavoidable wait until the summer of 1943 with the consequences that you, Führer, perfectly know.

The occupation of Malta, in addition to solving the problem of traffic in the Mediterranean (Libya-Egypt) we would return the full readiness of our armed forces, who are now tied to the Mediterranean area and will remain so until Malta will remain in possession of the enemy. The release of the Air Force, summed with the other advantages of taking of Malta, it would mean for us to regain freedom of maneuver, a factor of paramount importance for the victory.

The problem of fuel for the Italian Air Force needs to be addressed in relation to the operation of Malta, and in this regard are already underway practices among our staffs. But even in this field the conquest of Malta will bring a relief which, to transactions carried out, it will not be difficult to determine the scope, in relation to operational programs that will be formulated then.

I am confident, Führer, that, despite the serious difficulties of which I am fully aware, your personal intervention will lead a happy solution to this problem that has absolutely vital importance to our situation in the Mediterranean and its future upheavals.

MUSSOLINI

## LETTER FROM HITLER TO MUSSOLINI

Berlin, June 23, 1942

*DUCE!*

Thank you for your letter. The specific issues are currently under consideration at the offices of military and economic. But this I can assure you, Duce: that for many months considering the procurement of raw materials only as a common problem and that we treat it in accordance with this policy.

Then will follow, Duce, in a few days a precise answer to your wishes.

But I would like at this time, that from a military standpoint it seems to me a historical turning point, expose as briefly my thoughts on an issue that may be of decisive importance for the outcome of the war. Fate, Duce, offered us a chance that in no case will be presented a second time in the same theater of war. The quickest and total exploitation of it is in my opinion the principal military perspective. Until now I've always done that long and fully pursue every enemy defeated what was permitted by our possibilities. The English 8th Army was virtually destroyed. In Tobruk, where the port facilities are almost intact, You possess, Duce, an auxiliary base, the meaning of which is all the greater because the British themselves have built a railway from there almost in Egypt. If now the remains of this army the British were not pursued until the last breath of every man, the same thing would happen that did escape the success of the English, when, came not far from Tripoli, they suddenly stopped to send forces in Greece. Only this capital error by the English Command has made it possible then that our effort was rewarded by the reconquest of Cyrenaica.

If now our forces do not continue to the fullest extent possible in the very heart of Egypt, it will occur first and foremost a new influx of American bombers, as airplanes from long distance, can easily reach Italy. In addition it would follow a concentration of all the British and American forces everywhere collectible. In short it follows a change in the situation to our disadvantage. But the relentless pursuit of the enemy will lead to disintegration. This time Egypt may, under certain conditions, be torn from England. But the consequences of such a blow will be of global importance! Our offensive for which we open the road through the conquest of Sevastopol, will help to bring about the downfall of the entire eastern part of the English empire. So if I, Duce, in this historic hour that will not be repeated, I can give you some advice that comes from the heart more thoughtful, it is this: you order the continuation of the operations until the complete annihilation of the British troops, until your Command and Marshal Rommel believe they can do with their military forces. The goddess of fortune in the battles passes to leaders only once. Those who do not grasp at such a time, it can often reach more poorly. The fact that the British have, against all the rules of warfare, interrupted their first march on Tripoli to try on another ground saved us, Duce, and led

later the British to the toughest defeats. If now we omit to chase the British until the annihilation, the result will be that later we will have a number of concerns.

Accept, Duce, this prayer only as a recommendation from a friend, who for many years considered his destiny as inseparable from Your and acting accordingly.

With loyal camaraderie, your

A. HITLER

COMANDO SUPREMO

June 23, 1942 -XX -at 12.00

KESSELRING'S TELEGRAM

0235 -The rapid capitulation of Tobruk has emphasized a shock in the strength of the enemy troops.

Also for the following should be taken into account that a decisive resistance of any other position will no longer be made.

The operations against Maddalena-Sollum not present any particular difficulties.

But it must take into account that the opponent will avoid a bypass to the right carried out for the fourth phase.

A push higher to Marsa Matruk to El Daba should not give concerns although from Alexandria were sent reinforcements.

Also supplies local authorities should be ensured if the railway Sollum Matruk-Marsa-El Daba will be kept intact and if we will have enough rolling stock

The positions of El Daba and south offer the following ADVANTAGES:

- 1) A support wing to depression of Kattara which excludes more or less a movement encircling or enveloping, especially if the oasis of Siwa will be taken by us and maintained.
- 2) would fall into our hands the most airports night until now used and which are located to the west of El Daba.
- 3) Attacks daytime with fighter escort will adversely affect the efficiency of the port of Alexandria and also airports enemies next to the front and the Suez Canal, will be achieved with strength and consistent with what you can obstruct traffic more than so far he has done.

DISADVANTAGES:

- 1) Despite the favorable conditions the position requires a strong staggering depth of units and above all protection of aviation fighter relatively strong and substantial combat forces for the implementation of the tasks set out above.
- 2) With a forward movement in this area, the end of the transport crisis in the Mediterranean is predicted, the crisis may become a crisis of supplies for the North African theater.
- 3) The safety of transport between Italy and Africa is with this only minimally improved.
- 4) The depth of the battlefield is in unfavorable ratio than the existing troops.



In conclusion, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages if much of the transport crisis will be overcome in any other way.

To overcome this crisis it is necessary to:

- employ in Sicily 3-4 groups by German fighters and make ready many Italians;
- in addition to that the meeting of 6-7 fighting groups to destroy the enemy forces fighter, bomber and torpedo and after the deployment of at least three groups of fighters and three battle groups to neutralize Malta, permanently, as airbase.

This concept was not discussed with Rommel.

From the African arena might be taken in advance a group of fighters and a combat group, the other groups should be provided by Superareo or Germany.

KESSELRING

COMANDO SUPREMO

n. 31300/Op.

June 26, 1942 –XX

Subject: *Operations in Egypt*

Excellence the top commander Armed Forces A. S. -P. M. 11.

*Following telegram 31270 / Op. On 23 current.*

1. -The English 8<sup>th</sup> Army situation appears that advise take advantage as deeply as possible the successes achieved so far.

2. -Need however keep in mind that the problem of supplies presents difficulties. Malta resumed its offensive efficiency air; the routes to Tripoli are considered, for the moment, foreclosed; those for the dangerous ports of Cyrenaica. Efforts are underway to put Malta under strong pressure, even with air units that will be moved from Germany. But this takes time, so you can not avoid a crisis.

Meanwhile, every effort is made to:

-far reaching some convoy in Benghazi and possibly some steamers to Tobruk adjusting the loads in order to meet the major deficiencies;

-increase air transport;

-Make supplies, kind of fuel, in a half submarines.

3. -In this situation, it depends crucially on the stocks and the existing resources on the theater; proceed rapidly to avoid giving the enemy time to reorganize, but closely coordinate action with land and air forces as much as possible together.

It is in fact to keep in mind that the enemy falls back to their bases and to the center of his air force.

4. -Therefore the Duce order:

a) for the first time tend to occupy the bulk of the forces between the narrows of the Gulf Arabs and the Qattara Depression; this position should be the starting point for any further action;

b) to this end, first of all eliminate the fortified camps of the area Matruh-Bagush, annihilating the enemy forces deployed on the location of Marsa Matruh and avoiding proceeding leaving behind these forts still not eliminated;

c) make further progress in forces beyond the narrow indicated in a) the situation especially Mediterranean.

5. -As mentioned it should be noted that the enemy can quickly reinforce his plane deployment; It is therefore essential to make every effort to move forward quickly the deployment of German and Italian air forces.

6. -Just you can arrange the occupancy the Giarabub and Siwa oasis.

Order of the Duce

The Chief of General Staff  
UGO CAVALLERO

## COMANDO SUPREMO

## FROM SUPERCOMANDO A.S.I

Conferred yesterday with Bastico & Kesselring (,) this morning with Rommel at Sidi Barrani (,) From the first summary examination showed that logistical situation at the judgment of the Comando Superiore Armed Forces N.A allows continuation advanced despite serious difficulties (,) especially for water supply (,) appearing but surmountable.

Units consistency fallen sharply regard tanks because Rommel was right to want to avoid any interruption advance movement & therefore proceeded with few effective (,) He assured me, however, that within three or four days recoveries will allow it to bring its workforce to at least 200 tanks while the Comando Superiore Armed Forces N.A. he expects to achieve at the same time the actual 150 between "*Littorio*" & "*Ariete*".

Artillery deployment comes still substantial (,) That said I must inform you (,) Duce (,) I found here delicate situation for deep dissent determined between Rommel & Kesselring (,) dissent at background also personal (,) that led to Kesselring a rather pessimistic view of the situation including on the Mediterranean (,) Having been able to determine the psychological foundation of this dissent yesterday I was able to correct the orientation Kesselring so that the dissent could be made up this morning in the meeting with Rommel (,) With regard to African arena mattered ensure close coordination advanced air forces together with terrestrial ones (,) On this point there was disagreement which it was possible to compose based on your directives I talked at Superasi and illustrated at Rommel and Kesselring (,) present Bastico & Fougier (,) reaching over them perfect understanding (,)

In summary (:) begins (,)

1<sup>st</sup> -exploitation thoroughly the success so far achieved (,)

2<sup>nd</sup> -continue advanced without wasting time with forces as much as possible together acting as a primary objective the narrows between the Gulf of Arabs and the Qattara Depression after the elimination of the defenses of Marsa Matruh & Bagush (;) this line will serve as a starting point for further advanced (,)

3rd -indispensable that air units will follow at movements by troops and for this purpose Superasi must give the armor arm immediately the transport contribution means necessary (,)

4th - East Mediterranean Situation at the base of the problem in all (;) OBS Superareo and will resume as soon as the pressure on Malta (;) meanwhile transport through the Mediterranean will continue to the extent & transport that have been determined in Rome and of which I have given news here (,) Ends (,)

As you are already aware (,) Duce (,) the three aviation groups required at O.K.W. & will have been granted immediately (,) That Kesselring (,) as I said I had thought

at first disoriented (,) he assured me of wanting to apply to this task with all his energy (.)

With regard to the landing point discharges have already started at Tobruk (;)  
landing craft were already this morning at Sidi Barrani et prepare to move to Marsa Matruch  
(.)

Attack positions Marsa Matruch takes place the afternoon today (.) We will have  
news tomorrow (.) 192006 (.)

CAVALLERO

THE HEAD  
SUPREME COMMANDER OF GERMANIC ARMED FORCES.

Great Q.C., June 25, 1942

Excellency,

The lowest figures you gave to me for refueling since the proposed transaction, namely:  
40,000 t of fuel oil for the Navy  
and 10,000 T fuel for the Air Force

They formed the subject of thorough examination since the beginning of this month. I must declare to you therefore, unreservedly, the following:

1) The consumption of fuel for the German Navy War is reduced to the extreme. It no longer of any reservation and can only be supplied from current production. The sale of 160,000 T of fuel oil to the Italian Navy has in fact exhausted the last reserves exist.

2) It is expected, however, that the supply of fuel oil from Romania will be able to achieve, in the summer months, the agreed quantities, and this thanks to lower barriers to shipping and sufficient security against sabotage. It will be therefore possible to amass a certain reserve, albeit below the indicated amounts as indispensable.

According to the reports we have received supplies of fuel oil from Romania to Italy amounted:

in May to 51,577 T

in June to 53,000 T, and presumably even 60 / 70,000 T.

If you include in the calculation the 27,000 T about still in storage at the beginning of June, and if you infer about 65,000 T of consumption for the month of June, you can calculate, on July 1, of a consistency to maturity of approximately 13,500 T. If the supplies for the month of July could reach 70,000 T, you could count, to August 1, on an increase of the reserve up to 25,000 T.

My efforts to obtain greater quantities of fuel, besides the aforementioned, by means of an even greater limitation of internal consumption Romanian, in the common interest, were without result.

The supplies for the Romanian Navy War Germanic in any month does not surpass 10,000 T, so that only the German production should suffice, with about 40,000 T per month, the minimum requirement.

In that case, however, in the course of further checks, both production and consumption, the surplus were established, I will order their transfer to the Italian Navy.

3) As for the possibility of the sale of fuel in larger quantities for aviation, by the Air Germanic, I see myself also impossible

to provide more of the 9,000 monthly T currently prepared to sell. The current consumption at the eastern front, and that required by the formations of General FM Kesselring, far surpass the quantities calculated in advance, so that not only the limited reserves still existing are absorbed, but also, for the first time, I found myself in the need to restrict considerably, in addition to the consumption in the metropolitan war zone, also consumption in the forehead.

Please Etc. You want to conclude by the previous [is obviously for this] statement by the German, all the possibilities of help have been exhausted. There remains therefore only the support of the supplies for which Romanians implementation not cease to treat myself to you.

By the term of my special consideration.

F .TG KEITEL

COMMAND X CORP OF THE ARMEY  
OPERATIONS OFFICE

n. 4699/Op. of prot.

Z.d'Op., July 18, 1942 –XX

SUBJECT: Troop behavior in recent fighting.  
Command Inf. Division. "Brescia"  
Command Inf. Division "Pavia"  
Command of the Artillery of the X Corp.  
Command Engineers of X Corp.

The behavior of the units of the Army Corps, with the exception of a few, in recent feats of arms has left much desired. Some, indeed, are guilty of abandonment of position before the enemy without anything that justifies such behavior.

The leaders responsible for these recent events will be reported to the Court of War.

I know how everyone could and would tell me about the bad behavior of employee troops in the recent fighting.

Certainly all things to mitigate and to exonerate all. This however is not a good system. In every human action there is a bad side to be sought and fight. Our bad side is this: "is widespread in our soldier and certainly because of the pictures unwillingness to defend to the bitter end, if attacked."

All or almost all the battalions of the Army Corps - I say with full conviction - they could hold out and do his duty brilliantly fought as if they had definitely made the 28th Infantry Regiment that confer you the admiration of all components of the Corp.

What other result would have obtained under general operating in this important task of the theater!

The content brilliantly in front of our enemy lines could be counterattacked and defeated.

In contrast, the enemy has brought us tremendous losses in prisoners and captured weapons.

This has evidently contributed much to bring about a failure for our arms in NA discrediting the Italian troops.

It is sad to say but you will recognize him frankly and sincerely.

The recriminations are useless and harmful, not always, however, especially - as in our case - when there are responsibilities to be ascertained and faults to be punished.

The Corps is reduced as much today is crippled in its combat effectiveness.

On the other hand, the moment is such that it does not admit prevarication and still less weaknesses. Each with the remains of their units must do their duty equally and completely.

Let all remember that if the enemy took to a damning hypothesis upper hand would, ultimately, a great danger for our country because it would open the door to offenses directed to Italy and southern islands.

The troops are firmly convinced of this.

The positions now the Army Corps, must be *defended at all costs and at all costs*.

All are firmly convinced of this.

Everyone does his duty fully and completely.

The commanders of each rank speak *frequently* to the troops to take on the moral and spiritual energies, to galvanize them, in other words, at this difficult time in which the enemy has raised and is raising its head.

The commanders of the remaining strongholds, finally, that will be considered today by the commanders of the fortress and then subjected to military law regarding the duties of such commanders.

THE GENERAL COMMANDER  
Benvenuto Gioda



COMANDO SUPREMO  
IL DUCE  
CONSIDERATIONS ON THE MILITARY SITUATION

## 1.

The battle that began on May 26 and that can be called the Battle of Tobruk, is over in early July before the stronghold of Bir el Alamein. It has had great results because an entire enemy army was destroyed, but the goals envisaged as attainable - Cairo and Alexandria -not have fallen, because the Axis troops after having followed closely for more than 500 km. The enemy, arrived exhausted. All it took was an aerial formation and the appearance of small fresh forces, to stop an advance that had no reserves to be put online.

The Battle of Tobruk is closed; that tomorrow will be the battle of the Delta. The time to prepare for this battle must be numbered in weeks, but we must not lose a single minute of time to prepare for this race speed now engaged between the enemy and us.

## 2.

First "*conditio sine qua non*", to prepare the new battle is to preserve at all costs the current starting points. Any other hypothesis must be discarded "*a Priori*".

## 3.

To preserve and strengthen the existing deployment making sterile more or less partial enemies impulse, you must:

a) create large, deep ranges minefields in front and to the sides of the infantry, so that these eternally sacrificed units, are not goods of sudden raids of enemy tanks;

b) make the most efficient deployment of artillery, raking in Libya everything can be removed safely and doing the rest to come from Italy.

c) make it as efficient as possible the deployment of aviation, which must act on the ground strictly tactical, relentlessly tormenting men and equipment of the enemy;

d) put in pristine our armored divisions by increasing the amount of self-propelled since our M 14 can be considered outdated in the fight already on between armor and cannon;

e) rearranging the normal infantry divisions supplementing the actual and the media;

f) to flow gradually into the deployment divisions not yet committed ("Bologna", "Giovani Fascisti") and those arriving or prepared ("Parachute", "Pistoia", "Brenner") taking care not to cram too much to the front with units that do not possess a minimum of mobility;

g) remove no less gradually by units deployed men *rotating those* worn and whose further stay poses a danger.

#### TRANSPORTATION

Given the heightened screening of the front to the east, the port of Tripoli and Benghazi are also to take second place. All traffic should be concentrated in ports closer to the deployment that are Tobruk, Sollum, Marsa Matruh. Especially Tobruk. This will produce a relief that will be emphasized, as far as the truck mileage, from the exercise of the Sidi Rezegh - Marsa Matruh railway.

I will be happy on the day when I will be announced that the first train left and arrived.

#### SECOND FRONT

The second front is now desperately invoked by Russia and supported by large currents in Britain and America. The second front will and will have two aspects: the primary aerial and is already in place with the massive bombing of German cities. Cologne, for example, was partially destroyed, according to the testimony of the same German newspapers. (See "Berliner Borsen Zeitung" of 30 June).

The other aspect that is the land facing will not be in Norway and in none of the countries bordering the Atlantic and even in African countries bordering the same ocean (Morocco).

The second front will be in the Middle East and that is in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, that in countries where men and means land without a fight, in the countries that make up the great crossroads of the British Empire. Huge masses of men and means will be concentrated in this area with a strategic purpose and defined logic: *to prevent the forces of the Tripartite gravitating from the north, east, west can come together*. The vanguards of these air and ground forces are already on site, and others are announced. It would commit the sin of lack of foresight, if not provide himself - without delay - to fix mightily to defend the port of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania and protect especially each other, to the necessary extent, in the development of events.

#### HEADQUARTERS OF THE COMANDI SUPERIORI

Insist they approach to the deployment and this especially for moral reasons. I consider the area of Bardia offers the possibility of arranging the Comando Super -ASI in Its essentials.  
July 19 XX

MUSSOLINI

COMANDO SUPREMO

Prot. N. 149 -Secret

On 22, July 22, 1942 –XX

SUBJECT: General guidelines for the operations to Egypt. Transport organization. Defense A/A and coastal.

To Comandante Superiore Armed Forces. North Africa.

I refer to the directives of the Duce on 19 July.

*A) General guidelines for the operations to Egypt.*

I. - Our immediate goal is to be on the front of the Italian-German armored army a solid starting point for further operations of this first basic requirement: to be tightly organized to resist possible efforts offensive opponent; the deployment of the forces must respond to this end.

For this purpose it is necessary:

- a) directing all activities of all the bodies dependent from this Comando Superiore to upgrade of the deployment land and air to the Egyptian front, taking what you can from Libya and starting forward expeditiously as flows from Italy;
- b) strengthen, as you are doing, the deployment of artillery to the maximum extent practicable;
- c) supervising the completion of the unit; Ensure that, where possible, try more units are gradually retracted to sort itself and in any case it should be replaced by alternate elements; implement this measure with the greatest possible rapidity;
- d) assign to each of the Corp X and XXI the means to ensure sufficient mobility to employees infantry. To this end, I authorize to use the truck group of the "Pistoia" division, which calls for the arrival from Italy: the means necessary to ensure the best operation of the services in the interior of the large units, this Comando Superiore provide to it with others vehicles at his disposal, or coming soon, keep in mind that the entry into service of the railway will gradually facilitate land transport;
- e) ensure timely attendance to the armored army of materials needed for the strengthening of the positions, in particular protecting them with multiple and profound minefields.

(Note: The paratroopers battalions were assigned to the armored army to address the most urgent needs, but it is understood that, in the settled positions, these battalions will be recovered, except to determine the most appropriate location in relation to the use that the Commander of the army will give the Germanic paratroopers. With the intention to recover as soon as possible, the parachutists battalions, convenient to agree to fore warn the armored army).

II. The steady employment and good defensive organization of the oasis of Siwa are the essential guarantee for the side and the rear of the deployment in front of the Egyptian land and air.

III. -The Italian air force units available for action to the eastern front were reinforced with another Fighter Wing from Italy. You must complete the deployment and the good organization of the fields, in order to ensure the use of the weapon in the air mass in collaboration with large land units. Every care must be taken to preserve the great efficiency of the line units deployed.

*B) Organization of the transport.*

IV. -As Is known the Comando Supremo has already ordered the influx of:

-landing craft, for the organization of a cabotage service of considerable importance;

-staff and means to reactivate the railway from Tobruk to this front.

The Duce attaches great importance to the good organization of these two transport routes: the sea must allow an average yield of 500 tones daily transported from the ports of Benghazi and Tobruk to the worlds most advanced; Railway Stations least a thousand tones per day, subject to increase further. Hurry with the completion of connection Tobruk -Sidi Rezegh in order to be able to land as soon as possible the German Diesel locomotives (each weighing 49 T.). Taking into account also that the automobile transportations from Tripolitania will become increasingly limited, so it will be possible to obtain the availability of resources that automakers must allow a safe and a large supply of the armored army, and a sufficient supply of vehicles at large units online (as indicated in no. I, letter d).

V. -It is known that sending trucks from Italy is limitation in the possibilities of transport across the Mediterranean. Utmost importance, therefore, has the repair of vehicles in NA and every effort must therefore be made to ensure the maximum can return to service repairs.

*C) Anti-aircraft and coastal defense.*

VI. -In The framework of maritime transport from Italy and of cabotage in NA assumes paramount importance port security of Tobruk, Sollum, Marsa Matruh. So urgent adequate strengthening of anti-aircraft and anti-ship defense of these ports.

It is also important to improve the air defense in the area of the advanced fields and the immediate rear of the armored army, for more combat and neutralizing action of the enemy air force.

For this purpose, pending the deployment of weapons launched from Italy, it is necessary to urgently provide with artillery to be drawn from the most backward factions of North Africa, reviewing the measures underway in this regard in order to obtain the possibility of an immediate increase defenses in question.

VII. -The "coastal" Defense of the remaining stretches of the coast recently occupied must be organized drawing means from the rearward organizations of Libya, as necessary, for the moment, to devote all available transport across the Mediterranean to the strengthening of the deployment land and air to the Egyptian front.

*The Chief of General Staff*  
UGO CAVALLERO

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA  
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES NORTH AFRICA  
GENERAL STAFF  
S.M.I. CONNECTION AT ITALIAN-GERMAN ARMY

No. 3478 prot.

P .M., on 23 July 1942-XX

Topic: Situation A.I. T.

*The Comando Superiore Armed Forces N.A. - General Staff.*

*Military Post 11*

Reference radio 13500 Op. and 13512 Op. of the 22 c. m.

Marshal Rommel sends direct mail to the two aforementioned radios. He meanwhile explained his thought that I summarize here.

1 -He believes that the situation of the army defined by Command "tense but not serious," Both are still "extremely critical."

Faced with an opponent in the prevailing forces of infantry, artillery, tanks and at least equivalent in aviation, the army is deployed with units extremely tired, on a front that demands the use of all the units, without the slightest reservation.

The victorious defensive battle yesterday certainly has cost the enemy great losses. But also the A.I. T. came out badly worn. German losses amount to three infantry battalions temporarily out of efficiently.

While he notes the arrival of convoys to Suez to about 200,000 tons. the expected German and Italian reinforcements, in themselves very limited, they flow in much reduced pace.

However, since the reinforcements expected to be sufficient to rectify the situation and that in the meantime are not involving new sensitive losses at the AI T., the crisis can be considered resolved only when reinforcements arrived and has actually been used in line.

2<sup>nd</sup> - Marshal Rommel agrees fully in the decision to hold in place also in case of fluctuations of the line.

3rd -You can realistically exclude however, as stated above, that the opponent is able to make a profound breakthrough, which threatens to cut the army in two, and allows rapid and armored forces to push on our reverse (for example on El Dab'a). In this case it would be necessary to choose between the following two solutions:

a) continue to hold in place. The north stump, at the price of heroic sacrifice, pushed up employment, the last cartridge, would be forced to capitulate after 24 hours. The south stump, looking for a way out for the desert, would follow in short the same fate for lack of supplies.

b) promptly to avoid contact with the enemy and deal with an orderly withdrawal, with the intent to save the bulk of the army and cover Cyrenaica.

There seems no doubt to Marshal Rommel, that in said eventuality only the second solution is to be taken into account. And that the decision can be taken promptly, if the unfortunate eventuality materialize, only by the army leader.

Marshal Rommel has a similar meaning informed its Comando Supremo.

As I have repeated many times, you should not see this attitude of Marshal Rommel a "tendency" to retreat. On the contrary it is certain that he will try to keep possession of the position reached. Its action command in recent days is the best confirmation of this assertion.

Only in the extreme case, and to avoid a major disaster, they could be called upon to order the retreat. And it is clear that to conduct this operation with some chance of success it should at least be studied beforehand.

In conclusion, there is a way to decrease the chances that this extreme hypothesis becomes reality: accelerate as much as possible the arrival of reinforcements in line and the turnout in Africa than it is necessary to efficiently supply the war activity of the army.

*Colonel in the General Staff General.*

*Chief of liaison Staff*

Giuseppe Mancinelli

TO THE COMANDO SUPREMO  
for the Italian Marshal Ugo CAVALLERO  
Chief of General Staff

Z.G. on 28 July 1942 –XX

I. - By memorandum of July 22, I pointed out the main needs in terms of personnel released and of units (infantry -Bersaglieri - tankers - artillery - engineers), materials, vehicles to replenish the large units in line.

As has drawn from at various points touched on him from his command, the sheet 149 of the 22<sup>nd</sup> current month, mean:

a) - The remaining forces in Libya, after the subtraction already undertaken and in progress, are or will be much lower than the minimum compatible with the reduced needs while monitoring the border west of the land, the coast guard and air defense (see Also letter b) and Chapters VI and VII). Moreover, even if you wanted to and could leave undefended more of Libya, if it does not recover units or fit bad to operate on the Egyptian front.

Since I already spent all or most of the reserve forces and the available units, the reconstruction of large operating units and especially the best trained will be continued to have a significant new additions will flow only when instructed, or new units from the Motherland.

b) -Introduce with the rapid transport into line of several units and services left behind by the Army Corps in their rapid advance and the other rearward units (transported units exceeded 22 Battalion. infantry, over several units of other weapons and services) took place on the transport of new units –essentially artillery- which were taken from Tripoli, replaced when necessary with other less efficient, and made the most part mobile with the assignment of vehicles little by little that it was possible to scrape together or recover.

These transports that under well-known deficiencies of vehicles have perhaps miraculous, were performed, according to your directives, overcoming every obstacle, urging to the utmost the breakdown of supplies to the units online and logistic bases, so as to maybe deserve that ranking of "miracle" that you, Mr. Marshal, you gratify give the *effort* that, in the conditions in which we found ourselves, asking again the Comando Superiore.

It was possible to strengthen the line with more than 11 groups of artillery the most part taken from Tripoli: reinforcement that was decisive, according to the statements of the same Marshal Rommel, for the recent battles.

They were also taken from Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and transported over - as I will -Other batteries for air and coastal defense.

c) - Marshal Rommel was explicit in stating that it could not withdraw from the front, despite the Italian-Germans reinforcements had, no unit without preventive replacement.

I do not have available-as I said - no complement; and, in my memo dated July 22, I have already pointed out the minimum requirements and the degree of urgency.

How to dispose units consist only in reserve, the "*Bologna*" division command with 4 battalions (one battalion and all the artillery of the division are, as noted, already in line).

These four battalions are now committed to operational and logistical between Tobruk and Marsa Matruh. However, bearing in mind that at this time, as orderly, matter essentially hold the opposite of El Alamein, I placed the inflow of auxiliary units to Tobruk and Marsa Matruh and the insertion of the "*Bologna*" division in line; transport is compatible with the resources available and other urgent needs, including that, signaled me by the Intendente, to make flow ammunition to the front.

Command of the A.I.T. withdraw the "*Pavia*" Division, which, however, is reduced to only the 28<sup>th</sup> infantry (nuclei of two battalions) and a few pieces of the 26<sup>th</sup> artillery regiment: around a few hundred men. To rebuild itself, the "*Pavia*" takes battalions and groups from Italy, just as I requested.

For crafting further replacements in line it must wait for the arriving of units from Italy.

As with the replacement, it gets to the extent permitted by the situation, unfortunately, very low force and transport. The daily rate was 5 men per regiment and per week; aware of the importance of moral decision, I just now doubled that rate.

But it still will stay far below the need, they will not be reached until also the complements to replace the alternating elements, add up today to 10,000 and which will become 35,000 in September.

d) -The situation extremely insufficient notice of vehicles described in the memorandum, not only does not allow assignments to large units, but puts the services into serious difficulties.

Indeed verify, *not counting the deficiencies service of the Intendenza*:

-over 1,200 vehicles to arrive the organic tables for the divisions motor transport materials of infantry type AS, still always *their infantry troops walk* and engineers; (That is, the soldiers of the "*Trento*", "*Brescia*", "*Pavia*", etc. Must now not only walk, but for the most part also drag the 20 and 47 guns and carry their machine guns);

-from 400 and 500 vehicles to the divisions "*Ariete*", "*Littorio*", "*Trieste*" to carry all their strength: now they are forced to leave behind a very large part of their strength (about 1/3).

If you will share among other large units the truck group of the "*Pistoia*" division, this will deprive you of your mobility and we can operate with only three mobile divisions, in the face of four, apparently, the Germanic (15<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, 90<sup>th</sup>, 164<sup>th</sup>). If you want equality with the Germans, should leave the "*Pistoia*" their truck group necessary and will arrange of 500 trucks, of which telegram 36 of that Command, for the "*Ariete*", the "*Trieste*", and "*Littorio*". If they do not we will have to give up the mobility even of "*Pistoia*".

The railway will provide a real benefit to the supplies as it will make available a number of trucks. With them, however, it will only be possible to transport extraordinary - on the back - of material and troops, because regarding saving civilian heavy trucks, generally unsuitable for off-road and therefore can not be assigned to operating units such as trucks of the line.



The deficiencies of the infantry divisions than is necessary to transport their own materials, therefore remain substantially as they are today.

e) -Despite the shortage of vehicles they have already flowed to the front of important quantities of material strengthening, namely: 50,000 mines - 72,000 sandbags-9,000 stakes-1,000 rolls of barbed wire - 10,000 crates\*.

The influx continues.

f) - The intentions of the Supreme Command on Airborne Division, now here in attendance, will receive the confirmation to Marshal Rommel. It is desirable that when using online, in strongholds, that Marshal Rommel subjects the paratroopers, they do not lose too much of their special characteristics, so as to avoid a period of completion, adjustment and training, before you can reuse in their institutional role .

II. - The oasis of Siwa is currently manned by a battalion and a GG.FF. group, Plus various minor elements, including aviation.

As soon as I will be allowed from transport and situation, these units will be reached in Siwa-Giarabub from Commander and other units of the GG.FF\*\*. division, And soon will flow from Italy will give the rate of trucks needed to render a moving part , as it appears necessary.

III. - The organization of advanced airfields is underway to achieve the aims made known by this command.

IV. -Everything was made to operate the Rezegh Sidi-El Daba railroad, which, in fact, is ready. As already communicated by telegraph, a first train, conducted by repaired war booty locomotive, it was made on July 24 and a second, with our locomotives, July 25. The first 12 locomotives boarded landing craft were landed with delay due to bad sea conditions; daily traffic will increase little by little as come other locomotives and every effort will be made to the maximum use of available locomotives.

The new trunk Sidi Rezegh- Tobruk working hard: it is expected that by the first half of September will be finished the stretch Sidi Rezegh-El Adem crossroads; the next leg for Tobruk presents considerable difficulties and can not yet make predictions based on the date of preparation, which in any event you will make sure it is not too differs from the previous one.

Well being is the organization of the landing craft cabotage.

V. -The question of automotive repair has been repeatedly discussed, but it never managed to balance, with revenue of workshops, inefficiencies, so that the damaged parks systematically increase their stock. Integral solution can be seen in the proposal with sheet 10899/Serv. and upheld recently by the Comando Supremo (sheet 4841/Serv. of 20 July). Pending implementation of the measures required for the installations planned is essential from the influx of the Motherland of a great number overall - engine, as required with sheet 11,789 dated July 26.

VI. -The Air defense of Tobruk has now already 11 batteries and 12 sections 20 or 37; that of Marsa Matruh 4 batteries and 7 sections 20 or 12.7: all those taken from Tripolitania and Cyrenaica rear areas. t Will transfer also in the Sirtica area made by the Libyan Sahara and three other batteries.

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\* gabbioni (not found in dictionary, maybe a typo, but crate or box seems close)

\*\* GG.FF or *Giovani Fascisti* or Young Fascist

They had also in Homs the pieces and a number of personnel intended to constitute 10 batteries from 75/46 for which were missing and lacking, in addition to other personnel, all vehicles and, most importantly, the piercing ammunition. They are not then be used at the front.

It was possible, however, to give a minimum of features for use in anti-aircraft fixed location to 5 of these batteries, sent to Tripoli freeing as many 88s, have flowed to the front, as mentioned in Chapter I, point B).

It works, now, to scrape together the remaining 5 batteries the minimum personnel required to use for static anti-aircraft defense: of them, as soon as possible, the second will be sent to Benghazi to substitute two batteries of 88 to flow to the front; the other three will serve to further strengthen the air defense of the occupied territories and in particular of Marsa Matruh.

When you come from Italy the armor-piercing ammunition, vehicles and part of personal-as missing from requests already made - examine the possibility to divert the benefit of the front some of the air defense of Tripoli, in relation to the importance that the port will in overview of supplies.

Moreover, with current means, you can not do. I then turned my -with 03/10278 dated July 26 - Request award supplementary means.

VII. -In The entire coast of Libya (Km. 1,800 of coastal development) were around, in coastal defense, 45 batteries and 50 under strength companies, 20 of which are Libyan.

This is a minimum below which I do not think can go below, given that at least the forts of Tripoli, Benghazi, Derna, Tobruk and Bardia must have a even embryonic defense.

On the coast of the Egyptian territory occupied steps were taken, as far as possible, more in the sense of vigilance in the defense, with the very few resources could subtract from Libya.

All this appears in the graphics sketch of location.

If the overall situation in the Mediterranean are to fear attempts to land to which units should oppose troop consistent, it is essential arrive other forces from Italy.

And so, *a fortiori*\*, if regardless of the situation on the front of the Egyptian political and military situation generally requires closing the doors of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, considered in the directives of the DUCE on the 19<sup>th</sup> current, the penultimate paragraph, it will be necessary to raise attendance other units from Italy.

VIII. -This Command allows you eventually recall once again the attention on munitions of war and those deficient in particular (47, 20, 8, EP); the battle stabilized imported consumption and imports much greater than those that have occurred so far and so it must be foreseen a higher monthly requirement -Respect to then established - to keep at existing stocks, that for some calibers are reduced to little more than 1 unit of fire. The details of this are known from the situations that are periodically sent to the G.S.R.A.

From the foregoing, and quoted my memo dated July 22, it is clear that, after all, is already known to the Comando Supremo: *be that of extreme urgency* -in relation especially to the situation of the front - *to pour into NAt the means, which I disclosed the need*.

For materials, the Comando Supremo is, obviously, what can be done, both in

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\*Latin = "with even stronger reason,"

terms of availability, both in terms of transport. Compartment so it would be, for me, the return to the subject. But it is my duty to draw attention to the extraordinary consumption taking place and demands that the troops in line repeated, for operational needs.

For the personnel seems that with air transport available does not come to assist the flow as necessary with the speed desired: the reduced program of complements turnout indeed involve no less than 27 days, regardless of the influx of new large units (see aforementioned memorandum) if even the personnel of these were to be airborne. And the data provided by the Comando Supremo on air transport show same that from 1 January flowed by these means into NAS 40,000 people; as he hoped on a mass of 10,000 men per month, which at the time (with my 2970 dated 13/03/1942) I judged necessary in the normal way, without the occurrence of exceptional contingencies now occurring.

I understand to be extremely painful for us, and helpful to the enemy propaganda, the sinking of ships loaded with troops. But, right now, it seems to me that the only way to achieve a rapid reconstitution of the units in the site and the influx of new reminder is intended for the use widely to transport by sea, albeit in line with exception of a few hundred men steamer average tonnage can always find even precarious arrangement without bringing significantly limited the availability of cargo materials.

I felt compelled to summarize what is the current situation, what are the chances of Libya and its need to fulfill in full the directives Of this Comando Supremo; this in order to provide any additional element of judgment.

And I wisely anoint however, as it may be superfluous, that this command is working and will work with extreme tenacity and indomitable faith, to overcome all obstacles and help on his behalf, in the best way, in the framework of the directives had to join the objectives that were set out by this command.

The General of the Army  
Superior Commander Armed Forces SS.  
Ettore Bastico

COMANDO SUPREMO  
THE UNIT: OPERATIONS OFFICER - AFRICA THEATER

Prot. N. 31900/Op.

P.M. 21, there Aug. 12, 1942-XX

Subject: New sorting Armed Forces. North Africa.

*To Comando Superiore Armed Forces A.S.L*

and, for information:

*To Ministry of War - Cabinet.*

*To Ministry of Italian Africa (Military Office).*

*To General Staff R. Army.*

*To General Staff Royal Navy.*

*To General Staff R. Aeronautica.*

1 - According to the notice previously announced, on 16 c. m. the Comando Superiore of the Armed Forces of Italian Northern Africa, governed by Italian Marshal Ettore Bastico, Governor-General of Libya, changes its name to that of "Comando Superiore Armed Forces Libya" (Superlibia), with military jurisdiction throughout the relevant territory to the General Government of Libya.

2 - Under the same date, the Italian-German Armored Army, under the orders of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, go to the direct dependency of the Comando Supremo which will report directly to the operational matters of the army.

3 - Still under the same date, is made up a delegation of the Comando Superiore in NA (Delease); Excellence General Barbasetti Prun he was appointed Head of the aforementioned delegation. In this delegation will head the command of the Italian-German Armored Army for all non-operational issues of the army (v. Nos. 4 and 5).

4 - The political delegate for Egypt is headed exclusively to Delease.

5 - Delease, based on the directives of the Comando Supremo:

- Performs all tasks related to the feeding of Italian Armed Forces operating in Egypt, pointing to the Comando Supremo all their needs and taking care of the reception and forwarding of all supplies to the ports of arrival (or airport) to the area of application;

- Coordinates the operation of these supplies with those of the Germanic Armed Forces operating in Egypt, in particular as regards the operation of ports and cabotage operations and rail; to this end has at whether a representative of the German army and a representative of the German Air Force;

- It has territorial jurisdiction over the area in the rear of the German-Italian Armored Army (the boundary between the area in the rear and the territory of the Armored Army is clear from the Comando Supremo in relation to the operational situation);

- has control functions on Italian troops in transit to the Italian-German Armored Army and those withdrawn for reorganization in the area in the rear;

- has control functions for the disciplinary and administrative (ie excluding the operating part) for the Italian troops assigned to the German-Italian Armored Army;
- has directly under the Intendenza NA and all organizations and activities inherent in the Italian reception of the flows from the motherland for the armed forces operating in Egypt, cabotage, automotive and railway from the basics to the area of employment, and provides Transport security thereof;
- has dependence disciplinary command of V Air Fleety and Italian Air Forces operating in Egypt, and have, heard the above command, the air protection area in the rear and the cabotage traffic;
- has their dependency Marilibia and dependant organizations from this acting within the scope of the tasks assigned to Delease;
- Similarly and for the same purpose it has their dependency current command artillery and engineers of Superasi.

6 - All other organizations and the media currently dependent on Superasi that do business mainly in favor of the tasks entrusted to Delease, pass dependency by the latter even if located in the territory of jurisdiction of Superlibia.

In particular pass dependency by Delease cabotage flotillas dependent on Marilibia organizations and port facilities in Benghazi, Derna, Tobruk, Bardia, without prejudice to such organizations dependence of Superlibia for all administrative matters pertaining to the Italian Africa Ministry.

7 -Superlibia must have all their bodies give each aid act to ensure the performance of the tasks of Delease.

8 -Delease is drawing on this organization Command Superasi and require the Comando Supremo as necessary for the completion of the new organization.

To facilitate this constitution and to ensure first coordination between Delease and Superlibia of General Barbasetti temporarily retain the post of Chief of Staff of Superlibia; It will provide for the gradual separation of the different agencies serving Libya from those related to the specific tasks of Delease; retain until further functions of coordination between these and those.

9 - Superasi give notice of this circular to the command of the Armored Army.

*By order of the Duce*  
*The Chief of the Chief of Staff General*  
CAVALLERO

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA  
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES NORTH AFRICA  
GENERAL STAFF

N.01/16663/Op. of prot.

P.M. 11, on 14 Aug. 1942-XX

Topic: Interview August 10, c. m. Operating intentions of Marshal Rommel.

*To the Comando Supremo. Rome.*

It is transmitted, for information duty, the report on the interview had on August 10 c. m. by General Barbasetti with Marshal Rommel, where the Marshal has outlined his operational intentions.

*On order*  
*General Chief of Staff*  
Curio Barbasetti Prun

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA  
COMANDO SUPERIORE ARMED FORCES NORTH AFRICA  
GENERAL STAFF

Interview of August 10 with Field Marshal Rommel

On August 10, at the request of Field Marshal Rommel, I again went to the command post of the AIT., where, between the 15:00 and the 17:30, were on the following main topics:

*I. – Judgment of Marshal Rommel on the situation.*

Marshal declares himself satisfied on the whole. The crisis of the second half of July has passed.

The front is firm: the influx of reinforcements and accessories, laying minefields and stringing of barbed wire, although not completed, enabled the command of the AIT:

-to withdraw from the front, moving them into the reserves, nearly all the mobile units, armored and motorized;

-to give depth to the deployment line, through the establishment of large " mined pockets", flanked by sturdy pillars and guarded at the front, so as to have approximately half of the battalions in the second echelon.

Good is the situation of armored vehicles, almost equal numerically, but qualitatively superior to the enemy (the Marshal counts a German tank as equal to three British).

Good is also the situation of the artillery: higher is the heavy German artillery

(155 cannons and 210 howitzers); But they lack the ammunition and the means to deliver them online.

Satisfactory is the air situation, as the flaws fuel. In crisis-and still it is rather the enemy knows – the German antitank armament, and especially that of the 164th Division, came from Crete with only 50 anti-tank weapons, instead of 160 organic.

The arrival of means, announced by Germany (among another 200 heavy tanks), yet would improve the balance of forces, but the Marshal believes that will not arrive in time for the resumption of active operations.

In summary Marshal concerns boldly to the near future: in the case of English attack -which he considered probable in the short term in the north -the deployment is that it is left definitely the outcome; in case of resumption of the Italian - Germanic offensive, not many days, the chances of success are significant.

It should, however, make every effort to strengthen resources, troops and deployment.

*II. Covers the following issues:*

- 1 - Reconstitution of Divisions "Pavia" and "Brescia" and Bersaglieri Regiments
- 2 – In Flow of the division "Pistoia" and to its location.
- 3 - Availability and forecasts of tanks, semoventi, armored cars.
- 4 -Employment of the XXXI sappers Battalion, and other engineer units; availability of units and materials for bridging operations in Egypt.
- 5 - Ability to use other position artillery groups and 105/28 pieces.
- 6 - Employment of paratroopers by launch from the aircraft (question to be submitted to Marshals Kesselring and Cavallero).
- 7 - Siwa garrison, its tasks, its connection with the A.I.T.
- 8 - Security of the line Marsa Matruk -Qattara Spring.
- 9 -Ability to landings in the Bardia -Marsa Matruk.
- 10 -Availability current of air units; air forces for the defense of Siwa.
- 11 -Transportation, rail and maritime transport: strengthening the Marsa Matruk -Sidi Abd el Rahman trunk for transport of heavy ammunition of the A.I.T.

On all previous issues (that development in separate annex) is achieved complete agreement; Marshal assure that, as always, everything will be done to satisfy his desires. Marshal then speaks of the intentions operational.

*III. - Operational understandings.*

Marshal Rommel believes it is necessary to provide the offensive before the enemy has received the big convoys traveling and before the laying of landmines, in rapid course, has created difficult conditions for the prompt and decisive action.

You on the other hand it is necessary - among other things - expect that should come to us at least part of the reinforcements already underway in Africa and petrol for aviation.

Between these conflicting requirements, and also taking into account agreements reached with Marshal Kesselring, it is determined that the attack will take place - barring unforeseen circumstances - to August 26 (between 24 and 28), a full moon, so can begin and continue operations effectively at night.

Marshal faces, over the fortified complex of Alamein, What to do

defensive, and especially mine fields, the more dense and effective as you go north. He can not ignore it: therefore considered to attack with armored means to the extreme south of the English line.

The general line of attack are thus provided to him:

a) Set Up: leave unchanged the current deployment of armored forces (See united sketch) until the eve of the attack. Prepare in the southern section of our rear *camouflaged fakes* for the means of the German 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> divisions. Move these in this area the night before the attack, leaving visible signs of life in the areas of location abandoned.

b) Ensure the surprise is with aforementioned letter a), both with renouncing a proper preparation of artillery and aviation.

c) Attack suddenly across the front. Infantry units perform three basic actions, with character of big blows, backed by artillery action (see attached map):

- to the north: units of the division "Trento" and the German 164<sup>th</sup>;
- in the center: units of the division "Brescia" and Germanic paratroopers afoot;
- to the south: units Italian paratroopers afoot.

These actions - from start at approximately 22:00 - are designed to engage the enemy mass, to disconcert the deployment of artillery, to attract the reaction of enemy armored units.

They will therefore be carried out by relevant forces (to be specified), but not likely to jeopardize the safety of the opposite: it indeed will remain on the ground forces, and the media against tank, and wait for the hoped-breaking realization of enemy mass armor.

The objectives of these actions are only a few kilometers away from the starting positions.

d) Meanwhile the mass armored and motorized, attested on the starting positions south of Deir el Qattara, will begin the advance, will gradually take over (between the hours of 01:00 and 03:00) an array from west to east, facing north so will be executed great conversion to the left, to cut the coastal road and locked up in a big bag the bulk of the enemy forces.

Marshal repeated with this maneuver performed last May against the line of Ain el Gazala, except that now leaves to his right a strong enemy occupation, as was that of Bir Hacheim.

e) Now the battle will be conducted with the aim of annihilating the enemy *forces*. And he will then definitely eastwards to cut the road between Cairo and Alexandria. Further developments are expected for now.

So said Marshal Rommel, who will be extremely confident in the success.

#### IV. –*End of the Meeting.*

Marshal, after the meeting, mentioned the new organization of the Italian command in Africa, which was informed by Marshal Kesselring, and drew a favorable omen for a fruitful and close collaboration.

Wanted, finally, that you participate in his dinner; occur at 17:30: the Marshal did not take food from the morning; he was back at 15:00 by Qattara and had wanted to start immediately the interview, thereby holding up at that breakfast.

During breakfast, so delayed, the Marshal wanted, among other things to remember



our previous talks in mid-July; He told me, very confidently and cordially, that those days were the ugliest and torment of his military life, the densest of anxieties and moral depression; He had a comfort from news that July 19 Marshal Cavallero, Marshal Bastico and I brought you aid that would be made to flow as soon as possible on the line. Since that time, he added the Marshal his confidence was gradually restored and returned finally to the temperature of the beautiful days of Tobruk and of Marsa Matruh.

Once again, the Marshal held to express his gratitude for the contributions that this Supercomando has gone in July and August, while keeping in full and even surpassing the promises made to the Marshal: this aid (in the words of Marshal) helped *turn the situation around*.

At the conclusion of these statements, wanting to give a tangible sign of his feelings, just out of his caravan, he decorated me with the Iron Cross first class, accompanying the act comradeship very kind words.

*General Chief of Staff*  
Curio Barbasetti di Prun

COMANDO SUPREMO

N.300 of prot.

P.M. 11, on 17 Aug. 1942-XX

Subject: Guidelines for future operations.

*To Excellence Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, commander of the Italian-German army.*  
and, for information:

*To Field Marshal Kesselring.*

The directives of the Duce for the advanced to the Delta and then to the Suez Canal are those contained in the telegram no. 01/12236 on June 27 U.S. of Superasi.

We will provide additional clarification in relation to the present state of affairs:

a) *the starting point*: the current positions held by the Italian-German Army among the Gulf Arabs and the depression of El Qattara; these positions remain safeguarded for any eventuality;

b) *fundamental task*: to beat the enemy forces facing us West Delta;

c) *objectives*:

- Alexandria, also in order to use at least partially for that port fuel the advance towards Cairo; possession of Alexandria leads that are kept from us the steps of the Nile Rosetta, especially those of Desouk and Kafr el Zaiyat (for later use);

Cairo-region for the passage of the Nile;

-channel Suez;

d) *the closer cooperation* between land forces and air forces must be ensured in every moment of the action; the necessary agreements between the two German and Italian air forces are being finalized on the basis of these guidelines.

The Italian-German army will have a few days of an entirety of forces and means that will enable it to successfully tackle the enemy.

It is making the utmost effort to rectify certain deficiencies still exist in terms of fuel and ammunition; a limited number of trucks for the Italian units of the army can still flow within the current month.

Similarly it provides for supplies involving the two air forces German and Italian.

Predispositions are underway to ensure the subsequent supply of the advance,

So too it is being implemented predispositions on the part of Delesee for materials required to pass the Nile. Of course you will need to also rely - to this regard -activities resources in the site.

The date of commencement of operations is necessarily subject to the condition

that the current program for the transport of supplies, especially fuel, has to be arrested or reduced of important character.

It is desirable that action can be developed as soon as possible.

I will submit for approval of the Duce the date proposed by you.

*Order of Duce*  
*The Chief of General Staff*  
CAVALLERO

*Secret - Classified to the person*

Day August 22 - 20:35 hours

Subject: Armored Army "Afrika" Rep. N. 85 of the General Command of the 15 August.

*The German general at Italian the Q. G. of the Armed Forces  
Gen. of Inf. von Rintelen, the Comando Supremo.*

Implementation of the plan drawn up by the Comando Superiore of the Armored Army "Afrika", when approved by the Duce, is possible only if the following conditions are fulfilled:

- a) arrival at Tobruk resp. Benghazi, by 25<sup>th</sup> current, the announced convoys of ships from 1 to 3 with about 2,000 tons. fuel, 500 tons. ammunition, etc.;
- b) arrival of 4<sup>th</sup> installment before 27<sup>th</sup> current, in Tobruk, with about 2000 m. of fuel etc.;
- c) arrival of vehicles needed for the mobilization of 6 Bns. and 5 Bty. Of the Ital. mot. XX Corp, as well as the trucks for the supply of the Para div. "Folgore", before the 27<sup>th</sup> current, to the front. (See the Daily Bulletin of 20 August). In the opinion of the Armored Army, these vehicles may, if necessary, be taken off to the amounts of the Intendenza Delease;
- d) insurance for the transportation of the proposed additional 3600 tons. fuel and about 2000 tons. ammunition by 30<sup>th</sup> current, in Tobruk resp. in Benghazi.

If these promises are not forthcoming, the possibilities for implementing the plan drawn up, when expected, can not be envisaged. The company was founded on the use of favorable moon phases, must be in that case deferred and reworked to run on a different basis.

Facing the fact that during the next month the enemy, according to forecasts, will be greatly strengthened, an attack will have a decisive result only if personnel and material of the existing forces will be integrated and if they are made to flow, substantially, new Germanic forces.

One must also take into account the fact that the opponent, during the month of September, will attack itself with superior forces.

ROMMEL

COMANDO SUPREMO

THE OFF. OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT - AFRICA THEATER

No. 32132/Op. of prot.

P.M. 21, August 23, 1942-XX

Subject: Telegram.

*The office of the General German at the Headquarters of the Italian Armed Forces.*

Following verbal agreements are transmitted telegrams 2 -n. 32130 and n. 32131 –of this Comando Supremo and today, with prayer of urgent submission to the Command Italian-German of the army.

*Order*  
*The overall head of the department*  
GANDIN

*To the Commander Italian -German Army*

August 23 -Now 17,00

N. 3213/Op. Your response telegram of the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

They arrived this morning Tobruk 1,140 tons fuel & 200 tons ammunition.

Transport program being implemented provides arrival ports Cyrenaica to August 25 225 tons fuel, per day August 28, 2470 tons fuel & 24 tons ammunition, per day 10 September, 2956 tons fuel & 580 tons ammunition, September 4, 1000 tons per day. fuel & 1650 tons ammunition.

It is also provided immediate sending more fuel kept ready for the case losses in navigation.

The above only for large German units.

Approximately vehicles for Italian unity is hereby given that 54 vehicles for division "Folgore" have already arrived by motorboat "Foscolo" and it is expected arrival Benghazi August 28, 285 vehicles & September 4, 215 vehicles for large Italian units; Delease will start what is necessary to XX Army Corp.

UGO CAVALLERO

*To the Commander Italian-German Army*

August 23 – 17:00 hours

No. 32131/Op. Your reply telegram of the 22<sup>nd</sup> bridging materials.

They are sent emergency crews from four deck heavy type.

Expected arrival midday on September 2, midday on September 4.

Each half includes a motorized crew & one without towing. Each crew includes materials for 150 meters of bridge. In total 600 meters with practical possibility to build bridge of 450 to 500 meters in view of the necessary material reserves.

Bridge capacity 20 tons to 24 tons increased with tricks. With crews will also be a sapper battalion strength about 800 men.

Other materials such as canoes ferrying assault boats with outboard motor, are in place. Also Intendenza gathered material circumstance. units are designed to use such materials.

Delesee give concrete information & technical clarifications in this regard.

UGO CAVALLERO

DELEGATION IN THE COMANDO SUPREMO A.S.S.M.I.  
CONNECTION AT THE ITALIAN-GERMAN ARMY

No. 3963 of prot.

P.M. 27, August 28, 1942-XX

*Subject: operational intentions for the occupation of Egypt.*

*The Supreme Command Operations -Office - Africa Theater. Military Post 21  
Delegation to the Comando Supremo N.A. -Posta 27.*

This morning the Marshal Rommel has exposed the commanders of the Armored Corp and 90<sup>th</sup> Light Division to his intentions for further operations, after successful conclusion of the battle of annihilation of El Alamein.

These intentions must be for now understood in the sense of a generic indication, susceptible of changes and adaptations, based on the real situation that will determine.

The forces at work will be divided into three columns:

A) Group Bismarck: 21<sup>st</sup> Armored Division and the 164<sup>th</sup> Division (for which they are expected the necessary vehicles).

Objective: Investment and employment of Alexandria.

It will be assisted, and later replaced, by the forces of the XXI Corp (A') to be carried out in stages, with the rhythm granted, on the availability of vehicles. Column A will at a later occupation of the other centers of the Delta port.

B) CTA: 15<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, the 9th Division, Recon grouping (3 Recon groups Germans, one Italian).

Objective: possession of the bridges over the Nile at Cairo and occupation of the city.

It is likely that during the course of the battle of El Alamein recon groups are moved towards the east and south-east, so he can swoop on bridges in a few hours.

The X Corp (B') will reach in echelons, as aforesaid, to take the barrier of the Nile valley, upstream of the city.

Column B will continue as soon as possible towards the canal.

C) XX Corp: "Ariete", "Littorio", "Trieste".

Objective: elimination of enemy defenses of *Wadi Natrun*.

Later occupation of the bridges over the mid Delta.

A detachment will be sent on El Fayum occupation of that airport and local depots.

*Brigadier General  
Chief of the General Staff for Connections  
GIUSEPPE MANCINELLI*

DELEGATION IN THE COMANDO SUPREMO N.A. G.S.I.  
CONNECTION AT THE ITALIAN- GERMAN ARMY

Secret No. 107 Res.

2 September 1942-XX, 22:30

To Supreme Command

Reference sheet N. 104/4 Secret Op. Command of the Armored Army 08/29/1942.

I. 1 - The non-arrival of the quantities of fuel required in the above attached sheet - premise announced for the successful execution of the operation locally also limited - not allow the continuation of the attack.

The current situation of the Armored Army's fuel is as follows:

a) on African soil they are located between the ports of landing and the front still three units of fuel. Thus it secured the supply of troops, allowing a maximum consumption of one unit per day, only until Sept. 5.

b) in recent days came the following supplies: 2,610 tons. Fuels = 4.2 units fuel, 433 tons. ammunition.

They were sunk: 3,342 tons. Fuel = 5.5 units fuel, 350 tons. ammunition.

The quantity of 5,000 tons. Fuel announced coming from the Comando Supremo with its sheet n. 3998 et seq. 3/8, by September 3, have already been sunk 2,600 tons .; while 1,500 tons. They are planned by Italy.

It is not known yet the term of arrival.

c) Given that the steamers *Bianchi* and *Sportivo* arrive in Tobruk on 3/9, the supply of the troop will be ensured as soon as the 7/9 for three more days with a unit of fuel per day. Unloading and transport to the troops require three days.

d) The state of gasoline fuel for the Italian troops is still significantly worst. The steamer *Picco Fassio* with 1,100 tons. Fuel was sunk the 2/9 morning.

2. -A regardless of the insufficient supply situation, for the operation there are the following reasons which force the suspension of the attack.

a) the operational plan that foresaw a motorized group were to achieve, during the night on 31/08, under cover of moonlight, Taqa el-Qaret el Abd, with its advanced troops at about 40-50 Km. east starting positions, covering a land explorations gave weakly manned and partially mined, and then begin the attack northward at dawn on 31/8.

The advance, however, was delayed by so far unknown number of minefields kilometers deep and several of barriers, the first target of attack could only be achieved with forces as soon as the 8/31 evening.



It's coming this way to miss the surprise, an essential premise for the success of the operations.

b) As already made known to the communication 1/9, the constant intense enemy airstrikes carried out since the start of the day and night have caused significant losses in men and material.

These attacks were not without influence on the fighting power of the Italian-German troops. Particularly the lack of night fighters, was not been able to give sufficient protection to the troops during the night attacks continued for 7-8 hours.

By systematic harassment attacks by enemy aviation on supply columns, on the railway and coastal shipping, it is further disturbed significantly refueling.

These circumstances compel the Armored Army to cease the attack. The Army therefore falls back on the starting positions, gradually, under pressure from the enemy, if the air supply and the situation did not change radically.

II -In night from 1<sup>st</sup> to 2/9 and 2/9 the same were made more intense enemies air strikes with bombs and weapons on board. Already during the morning 7 attacks with 20-30 units at a time. Attacks of harassment of tanks and enemy reconnaissance tanks on the sides and rear of the motorized group were rejected.

Gen. MANCINELLI

SUMMARY OF THE MEETING HELD BY ROMMEL  
AT HIS GATHERING ON 22 September 1942

*Reviewed by Deleaze Superlibia in September  
with sheet n. 2656 Sit.*

A) *Location and use of the Army.*

We had to stop the recent offensive operations in dependence of catastrophic situation of supplies.

Within days we were sunk several thousand tons of shipping.

The attack was, on the other hand, linked to the moonlight. The operations were offered useful teachings. Only those who act by surprise and quickly be able to achieve success; We need to cross the minefields as quickly as possible; each stop due to logistics needs -as to fill the tanks-is dangerous.

Once you start an attack, it should develop without any stops generally for supplies or other; only the speed does suffer the minor losses.

We were forced to stop, to remove landmines, and to maintain supplies of fuel; This allowed the opponent to concentrate, against us, artillery and aviation.

Before the attack, the commanders of the German and Italian air forces we were assured that we would not have to fear from enemy aircraft; in fact the efficiency of this had not been appropriately evaluated.

The enemy air action has been strong; the bombing day and night were our nightmare, especially for their moral effects.

I trust that our air forces are able to obtain similar effects to the detriment the enemy.

The fighting of the fighters have little consequence; the use of stukas is results falling.

We had to endure air strikes, repeated the same points; the enemy was able to find at night as his objectives; It took particular aim at the anti-aircraft units and 88.

The Army stopped the offensive and took defensive positions that are favorable for a future attack.

We could include in our positions the English southern minefields, and we have at our disposal dominant land, which gives us good availability for further operations.

I trust that in the next week, or in the coming months, we will be able to strengthen the Army. The problem is only a matter of supplies.

Of paramount importance is mastery in the Mediterranean. For now, the Army is not getting enough to live.

We all love to go to Egypt, but now we can not risk a new offensive.

I will pass on the offensive when I have enough to do so; heavy equipment, gasoline, vehicles of all kinds, effective and complete.

Meanwhile we keep on the defensive. Of course the defense will be integrated offensive ideas here and there; where the enemy offers opportunity.

The Army will assume a best deployment, so as to liberate most of the mobile forces. They are currently deployed on the front XXI and X Corps.

If the enemy were to attack, attack nowadays; not only between the sea and the depression of El Qattara, but in depth, over the Egyptian border.

The latest thrust made from Kufra to Barce, to the gates of Tobruk, near Benghazi, should be considered only as an experiment.

The attempt will likely be repeated with greater means to resolve the situation.

It is true that the way of Kufra is long; but for us no road has been long enough.

The enemy is superior to us in terms of air forces; He is also likely to use paratroopers.

Therefore, to keep us in Africa is not enough to defend the opposite; It must be very mobile to give the shots from here until Ajdabiya.

In our rear there are substantial forces.

It may be that the enemy attempts a landing from the sea on our rear; the British do not mind losing a few thousand Canadians or Poles.

However, we must be ready to beat the enemy where we'll find him.

The new line-up has taken away from the line mobile forces, putting them close to the unit first group to provide them an additional support of artillery and anti-tank means.

Between the two groups of armored north and south was built a very large mined barrier, that is to stop the enemy at El Ruweisat.

The individual armored columns are currently used for defensive, but they are ready to take in view of a use offensive: either to destroy enemy units they managed to infiltrate our camp, is to act in the rear also distant.

The front will be lightened, to save forces and reduce losses.

The outposts of combat will be given a further defense of anti-tank mine and against infantry.

There will be an additional laying of bombs for aircraft in the "gardens of the devil."

This requires projects precisely drawn, to be achieved piecemeal.

Even the position of strength we need to see clearly; implement a set plan; you should not leave it to the commanders of battalion or companies.

All weapons must be exploited. Keep in mind that it may be that the two Corps were required to defend the front, without being able to count on the support of troops or armored swift.

I'm not worried about the possibility of resistance to these forces.

We just have to take steps to strengthen the front.

The deployment will be adjusted within a few weeks will give way to fear not even a colossal attack.

One thing bothers me: buried and camouflaged trucks, up to the Egyptian border.

I flew over the front and rear; in the latter it has adopted a way of life stage.

The vehicles, for us so precious, they buried a meter and a half and kept well spaced.

This may seem, now, not necessary; who has enjoyed the enemy aviation hell knows what we can expect during an enemy attack.

Please treat by concealing all means.

*B) Training.*

The new line up that will be taken by the Army should allow officers to take in hand their units.

We should be given to developing training courses for officers or instructions for departed.

It is my desire that training is developed in collaboration between Italians and Germans.

So long as the Italian units will not be equipped with better weapons, they will be undertaken; through collaboration it will be able to give support to the Italian soldiers.

We have, for example, recently received heavy seventy anti-tank pieces and as many 88.

This constitutes a considerable reinforcement, because last May we had only 24 pieces of 88, regardless of Russian self propelled 76.

We also received a reinforcement of self propelled 150 howitzers, etc.. etc. I'll see soon the Duce, I hope that the Italian forces will soon be equipped with modern weapons.

I recommend action to promote the training of minor units. Individual commanders molding units with their own ideas.

The German company is capable of developing a large fire.

It is necessary that the best weapons, the most powerful, are served until you have men in drove off.

To understand this concept to all officers.

The company, although reduced strength, must be able to fight equally; to get what it needs to have a good weaponry and knows use. This is a matter of training.

I recommend to use this time for training or collaboration.

It will be useful to set up groups or units for training and play with these demonstration projects, with the aim of raising in all units the fighting capacity.

Special attention should be given to education on mine clearance; It should not scare the possibility of having to cross a minefield.

As for the course, please give prompt start to this collaborative work.

I do not have nothing against that licenses are granted to officers, even higher.

I myself away for service: I see the Duce and the Fuhrer and then take a few days rest.

I hope to get to the Army all that is necessary. General Stumme, who enjoys my full confidence, will replace me in my absence

MINUTES  
OF THE MEETING HELD BY DUCE AT PALAZZO VENEZIA

*on September 27, 1942 with the Chief of the G.S. General  
and the State Secretary for Manufactures of war*

The Duce informs to have read the situation for each Armed Forces presented by C.G.S.G. and reads the summary report drawn up on the spot by Fabbri Guerra.

Then makes a quick review of the situation taking into account the fundamental aspects of the problem (steel products, special steels, aluminums and precious materials) and highlights as a base of all these problems is that of both solid and liquid fuel, and energy electricity. It underlines the absolute necessity in the context of the general strengthening of our armed forces are kept very present the Aviation, because the increase of our production is aviation imposes peremptorily.

The C.G.S.G. reports that the problem of the Aviation can be solved sufficiently only if we can assure the availability of aluminum and stainless steel and makes a brief review of the situation of aluminum.

The Duce highlights the remarkable results that can be had from the production of bauxite and suggests to Fabbri Guerra that this availability of raw materials will face significant exchange with Germany for other concessions.

His Exc. Favagrossa reports on consumption of aluminum in the manufacturing side of the aircraft and on the need to simplify the process to reduce the excessive degree of scraps. He adds that as regards the timber there is the possibility of replacing the **sprüss**, that we can not procure, with spruce and black locust.

Closed this parenthesis the Head of SMG resumes exposure and concludes that, as regards the three Military:

1 - For the Navy was able to predict that the approved program by Duce for 1943 it will be brought to a conclusion.

2 - For the Merchant Marine has secured the necessary for the completion of the current program and for the construction of a number of ships in concrete and it remains to solve only the 1943 program of the ship-owners Federation.

3 - For the Aeronautics C.G.S.G. It refers to what is stated above and points out that a significant increase in output can not be obtained without an increase in raw material prices.

4 - Regarding the Army our present situation of raw materials does not allow us to complete the upgrading of the 20 Div. of the Egyptian and Russian fronts while you can not think about the enhancement of another 10 Div. as needed. This is regardless of the problem inherent in the anti-aircraft defense of the territory to be increased considerably.

The Duce then goes to consider the deployment of our units and considers the Western frontier. It sees this as a united front in its three areas of the Alps, islands and Tripolitania. Duce asserts that an notable increase

of war production in the fields air and land would require an intervention of Germany after examination with the authorities responsible for our operational capabilities and needs that you are connected.

The C.G.S.G. informs that in connection with the great urgency presenting the defense of Libya to the west you need to think about the transfer to Libya of at least two divisions that can distract from the western border with the approach of the bad season. These two Divisions would be the "Centauro" and the "Piave" (a Armored and a Motorized) and transport should be as soon as it recovers the pressure on Malta and then you can get back on course to the west. This apart from the airlift now decided of the - " Spezia ", which transport you have to start from the 30<sup>th</sup> current from Castelvetro. This Division will be transported to Misurata, in view of the possible operations to the Libyan Sahara.

The Head of the GSG believes that with these measures we can meet the most urgent needs while winter can be used for carrying out the program in the project and for the reorganization of the units removed from the Alpine front.

The Duce is satisfied of these measures and changes to interest in the production of tanks. It asks whether the production of armored vehicles that is smaller and armored cars and L6 can not be decreased in favor of the production of the M 15 tank, in the expectation that we can think of the P 40.

The Head of GSG believes that this must be examined in order to prepare for at least another Armored Division and ensure the supply of four armored divisions should be increased by about 50% the current production.

The Duce thinks that production should be raised to at least 160 tanks per month.

The C.G.S.G. It takes commitment to examine immediately the problem with experts on the adverse motorization that the increase in production should be primarily focused on self-propelled 75, bearing in mind the directives of the Duce in this regard and the fact that the M 15 tank is almost obsolete, taking into account also to its deficient weaponry (cannon 47) and he adds that it should also accelerate the production of the P 40.

It is also present as the preparation of a new armored unit includes a number of other problems, including that of trucks.

The Duce considers then Agree begin the necessary steps with the German authorities. The C.G.S.G. informs that has already made itself felt in this regard the OKW that no negative opposition took part after carrying out operations to the eastern front.

However remains determined that His Ecc. Favagrossa having, as announced, to take early contact with the Secretary of State Thomas begin to address the problem.

The Duce does this after it was necessary to also consider the hypothesis that ally can not give us a sensitive help. It emphasizes that from an overall examination of the problem appears essential availability of fuels and electricity and is intended to examine whether meanwhile the amount of fuel available to the Fabbri Guerra for war industries can not be increased.

The problem is examined and it is concluded that the Fabbri Guerra could receive 100,000 tons more per month a large step may be done at least for the duration of the winter season in order to have for the next spring achieved

some appreciable result. This is in addition to the performance of the hydroelectric plant of the Medio Adige that second communications C.G.S.G. It should be prepared to end year with a production of about 40 million Kw monthly (to be paid to the plant of Marghera to get so about 1,600 tons. of aluminum per month).

The Duce concludes that endeavor personally to get to Fabbri Guerra, the monthly availability of coal, an increase for the benefit of the defense industry and why has a plenary meeting on the problem of the strengthening of the Armed Forces and the Merchant Navy to take place with Him Thursday 1 October at 17:00.

MEETING MINUTES CAVALLERO .KESSELRING  
ON 16 October 1942

*at the Comando Supremo present Colonel Otzen and Major Milo and then Admirals Riccardi and Sansonetti*

Marshal Kesselring begins by informing that the Axis Aviation losses in the sky of Malta are serious due to the tactics of the British fighter, tactic which consists in the attack from above with the sun behind. The enemy losses are much more important and yet the action to get a satisfactory neutralization of Malta will last longer than expected (at a glance about 25 German losses and our 7; to about 70 of the enemy).

Marshal Kesselring informs then that is the next coming of Marshal Goering unofficially. Claims to have already spoken several times with the Marshal said the need to support Italy more materially (means and raw materials) and that they would ensure to support this thesis at the Führer. Adds Marshal Kesselring that aims to take advantage of the next meeting with the RM Goering to talk about a closer cooperation and technical material between Italy and Germany.

The Chief of General Staff Marshal Kesselring informs that, following an own letter allegedly delivered to Marshal Keitel for by Marshal Rommel, in the coming winter months, the German Navy will transfer to Italy, on the other hand supplies decreased from Romania, a amount of fuel oil over 40.000 tons. including 20,000 tons. to serve for the Aegean, which operating reserve, in relation to a planned deployment of Italian naval forces in that sector.

Marshal Kesselring informs then that the Führer has entrusted the responsibility of air defense of Crete and the coast and the Greek islands occupied by the Germans, and therefore has made contact with Gen. Loehr who has similar responsibilities in the Balkans up in Thessaloniki. He added that said General acting under his direction; Gen. Loehr will soon pay a visit to the duty of Chief of General Staff.

Marshal Cavallero recalls having met with General Loehr at Uman during his trip to Russia, in the wake of the Duce, and says that they will review with pleasure.

Marshal Kesselring then promises the opportunity to enhance the Aegean, with particular reference to Rhodes and Karpathos.

The Chief of General Staff responds by informing to have already underway appropriate action.

Marshal Kesselring adds that for its part intends to Crete in greater efficiency and that there will many means antitank because it believes that any attempt to land the enemy would be made with competition of floats. He then expressed his concern for transport to the I.N.A and he complains deficiency of gasoline in Crete, so that had to suspend for 10 days the air transport from this island towards Africa.

Marshal Cavallero says that in terms of transport was done by us all that was humanly possible and that the delays are often caused because of absolute force majeure, such as the three-day delay of departure for the *Portofino* for the presence of submarines enemies to which he had to hunt. It added that the transport programs of our Navy can not be understood



with absolute constraint to the dates of preparation of steamers, which are subject to variations especially for damages, given the intense wear which we subject all our vehicles, including stocks.

Marshal Kesselring says he is far from wanting to criticize; He expressed his apprehensions only because the Armored Army ran the risk of not being able to move further deficiency of fuel; *with the program that he was informed by his office this morning it is now quiet.*

The Chief of General assures the Marshal Kesselring who personally checks every day and all the measures on transport pushing hard efforts of all the organs necessary.

Marshal Kesselring knows that is a result of personal intervention of Marshal Cavallero transportation fuels that the problem has been resolved in recent days; and sincerely thanks.

The Chief of Staff General informs that he prepared a convoy of three ships and another two (*Tripolino* and *Schillin*) for all the west route and asks when you can predict the start in relation to proceedings in progress on Malta.

Marshal Kesselring says, "As soon as possible; tomorrow the state of neutralization of Malta will push through what you want."

Adds Marshal Kesselring that Supermarina chose a route further away from the coast of Greece to escape the dangers of submarines, but this makes it much more difficult the air escort service. The Italian air force can not intervene from the fields located on that coast. The German Air Force could give the stock using the Ju 88 and 110, but at this time does not have availability.

Also Marshal Kesselring informs that the German Aviation spotted in recent weeks, no fewer than 30 enemy submarines, he bombs them by forcing them to remain submerged and this has given notice to OBS and the Italian Navy. Expresses the opinion that, when I spotted the enemy submarines, you must keep them under the control of Aviation to force them to be immersed in such a condition that they can not harm our convoys, and that as long as these are not passed.

Marshal Kesselring then asks what are our intentions to Kufra.

The Chief of Staff General replied that, for the moment, does not see the possibility of terrestrial action from Gialo on Cufra; informs of the measures under way to Tripoli.

Marshal Kesselring says that to act on Cufra should create a basis for Gialo power even airborne troops landed near Kufra.

The Chief of the General Staff also announced that with the convoys arriving in the course of the means that would allow already some guarantee to the origins of Kufra. But what is more important is the establishment of a mass movement in the center, with the Divisions "Spezia", "Centauro" and "Piave", the next sending; this mass might act to the south, south-east and, if necessary, also to the west. This mass would be a true insurance premium for all of Libya.

Marshal Kesselring declares full agreement. It adds that if we had possession of Kufra and gasoline necessary could lead beyond the threat to the Tibesti. Tell then to have planned an action of *Wadi Halfa*, railway station of the British in Egypt to Ethiopia. He would like to put on the ground, in this town, especially trained saboteurs, blasting bridges and stop rail.

The Chief of the General Staff expressed some doubts about the usefulness of a

such action, bearing in mind that the railway will stop at *Wadi Halfa* and resumed only in Aswan, 300 km. further downstream. He believes that the results of such an undertaking, that the Comando Supremo has studied several months ago, are not such as to justify this, for the moment.

Marshal Kesselring states that it leaves the opinion of Marshal Cavallero; It is limited for now to simply study.

They occur while the Admirals Riccardi and Sansonetti, expressly summoned, and we examine the question of the next convoys.

The Adm. Riccardi informs that, according to program setting of the Navy, the possibility of a convoy to the west would not have expected that for the 24<sup>th</sup>, but that Marshal Cavallero ordered to modify this program so that the convoy could leave immediately. He examined the problem and believes he can solve as long as postponed twice naval movement that was expected (battleships from Taranto to Naples and a group of cruisers in the Aegean). A suitable delay for this shift, as regards the battleships, could solve the problem. A brief discussion of detail confirms this possibility and Adm. Riccardi is appointed by the Chief of General Staff to investigate the details. Staying meanwhile understood that you will do three convoys contemporaries and that these will have to be at sea, respectively, south of Sicily and east of Greece for the 19<sup>th</sup>.

The two convoys that follow the eastern route, one route will turn to Greece to qualify for the aerial protection of Italians fighters.

At this point the conference is interrupted because all those present in the meeting room to pass to attend to daily conference on the problem of transport.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD IN TAORMINA  
AT THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE O.B.S. ON October 22, 1942

Present:

Marshal Cavallero - Excellency Fougier-Gen. A.A. Cerruti -Captain Girosi

Marshal Kesselring - Excellency von Rintelen.

*Marshal Cavallero* – I state that purpose of the meeting is to consider first the overall situation in the Mediterranean.

The Duce believes that we have to consider the worst case scenario and that is an enemy attack in the near future and this will be particularly large, intense and simultaneous on the Egyptian front, from the South, coming from Kufra and the Libyan Sahara. It is likely to be attacked also the Aegean. For now not expected to take into consideration the Tunisian border that will come into play in the period further.

The problem that then arises is to reinforce all the deployment Mediterranean.

1) The Aegean is in the process of rapid expansion.

For the time being we have suspended the move, although already approved by the Duce, the Naval Force to the Levante for deficiency of fuel oil. To give an idea of the seriousness of our fuel oil situation, the Destroyers. which accompanied the last convoy have had to replenish from the cruisers located in Messina and so did the three torpedo boats, running at this time the anti-submarine raid on the route of the west, from the destroyers located in Sicily.

General von Rintelen is aware of the situation and whether it is affecting. In the interview that will take place tomorrow between the Duce and the Reich Marshal certainly will discussed the fuel oil.

2) The supply of the Armored Army of Africa is a major problem especially for motor fuels.

We had the incident of the "*Panuco*." The "*Proserpina*" started last night, and precautionary measure overcoming many difficulties I did prepare for the 25<sup>th</sup> cm the tanker "*Luisiana*" in Taranto. In relation to the events it will be regulated traffic. There will be a convoy of 2 tankers and 2 steamers 28<sup>th</sup> or 29<sup>th</sup> (depending on the arrival of the "*Proserpina*") and one major on 2 or 3 November.

*Marshal Kesselring* -considers that the situation in Egypt has not changed substantially and if the attack will take place will be more for political than military.

There are groups of ships that could suggest a coup on Crete and Rhodes. At Cufra reconnaissance yesterday revealed only two or three ships. Today ordered another reconnaissance on the roadsteads from Kufra to the Nile.

In summary the opinion that today the situation Egyptian - Libyan is not worrying, but may become further. He stated that he was given the responsibility of defending the Aegean coast occupied by the Germans and Crete. He believes that this defense is fundamental deployment Rhodes - Karpathos - Crete and the area of Piraeus.

When you will be brought 4-5000 men to Rhodes is his impression that still fail in Rhodes and Crete in the means against tank. Believes that the only real danger

for both islands it is constituted by a landing of tanks and by a continuous air action. Crete has given instructions that will achieve a good safety against the action of the air.

It considers very important the following points:

- 1) Carry out the planned naval deployment.
- 2) Determine the exact arrangements for the mutual air support.
- 3) Organize a detachment of landing you can quickly transfer the point threatened. To do this you need at least 5 landing craft.
- 4) Establish a single command.

His personal belief is that the most important of all is the performance of the naval deployment.

*Marshal Cavallero* - It is also our desire but, as I said, it lacks the oil. I agree that there are important attack clues.

But the directive of the Duce to consider the attack not far ignores the fact that, if the strengthening of the Aegean can be done relatively soon to achieve that intended to address the origins of Kufra or from the Libyan Sahara is time consuming. Therefore, we must maintain this hypothesis behind our actions.

*Marshal Kesselring* -Our African situation has become weaker because:

- 1) There were not brought enough men, especially for the alternations.
- 2) Insufficient fuel and vehicles.

Do you think that the current measures, especially for fuel, are likely to arrive late.

He believes that it would be necessary to speed up the unloading of fuel at Tobruk. 29<sup>th</sup> C. M. the Armored Army will have only one day of operation, and aviation gasoline will be reduced to 1500 Tons.

*Marshal Cavallero* -This crisis is due to the difficulties of traffic. The tankers were strongly attacked, damaged and even sunk. This is due to force majeure due to the war, against which we struggle with all our strength. Deficiency of strong aviation gasoline 5th Air Fleet is then due in particular to the fact that, having decided to make in common with the German air units, was pushed hard refueling German.

Some observations of Marshal Kesselring about the regularity of submission of the tankers, the Marshal Cavallero repeats that the Comando Supremo follows with maximum intensity this problem and he is dealing with it every day.

For details, there is a Joint Committee which can and must be made available all the issues and any desired.

To be prepared for the unexpected and after having been notified by Marshal Kesselring that transport by air 250 Tons of fuel for the Armored Army, Marshal Cavallero has it that our aviation equipment quickly for the possible transport of fuel in flight (collecting cans in the fields).

*Marshal Kesselring* - Notifications that between 8 or 10 days he plans to travel to Africa, via Crete and, if Marshal Cavallero will, also in Rhodes.

*Marshal Cavallero* - How has already said the Duce, I have arranged the transport of troops to Tripoli. This mass must be considered nucleus of the reserve and serves to

protect the flanks of the Armored Army and will also be the first group to guard at the Tunisian border.

The Führer had advised him to move into Tripoli two armored divisions and the measure had substantial start (Division "*Littorio*" and "*Giovanni Fascisti*"), but the advance in Egypt has absorbed all reserves. We must therefore restore them. This vital necessity requires us to keep open the western route.

*Marshal Kesselring* –He pointed out that these transport must not affect those for the Armored Army and Marshal Cavallero agrees.

*Marshal Cavallero* -To keep open the traffic is necessary to leave the most of the route by submarines and bomb Malta.

On this subject, it takes place a comprehensive discussion in which all those present. The synthetic points of view exposed are the following:

*Marshal Kesselring:*

1) The Reich Marshal informed him by the Führer that losses on Malta have been stronger than expected and therefore the action so it can not be continued.

2) He plans to equip with Stukas and fighter pilots of at least 40-50 Jabos to attack airports. This measure, however, requires time. He asked three other fighter groups.

3) He plans to increase direct supplies on trains and the number of nocturnal fighters and devices equipped with jamming, so that each convoy is escorted through the night, because he noticed that the attacks were not just uttered these devices are away.

4) Calls by the Air Force have increased in Sicily fighter and Cant Z for night attacks.

5) The routes of the convoys must constantly be changed and sometimes you do navigate convoys only during the day.

6) Does that with the attacks that will lead you can prevent the departure of the aircraft from Malta, but very confident on the direct protection of convoys. The advance of winter with bad weather will make air strikes more difficult and we must try to take advantage of the bad weather.

*Excellency Fougier:*

1) At present it is excluded from us any strengthening of Sicily and the matter has prepared a very precise situation the Air Force, which reserves to show to Marshal Kesselring. Subsequent Libya has absorbed many forces.

2) If the advancing of the winter season will decrease a little commitments of stocks on the Levant route, examine what you can do for Sicily.

3) Do you think that with something special precautions to bomb Malta can be done, but very confident on the basis of direct convoys, if properly spaced, may be of considerable consistency.

4) He has ready rocket parachute with wires against torpedo planes, which would cost the Royal Navy might test on board ships.

*Marshal Cavallero* - Summaries discussion and sets the following directives:

1) Continue with the utmost effort transport of fuel.

2) The R. Aeronautica equipped for aviation transport of fuel.

3) It is established that the transport route western are essential, but it is nevertheless agree that should not affect those for the Armored Army.

4) For the western route it is essential to bear in mind and Malta on the subject is necessary to further contact between Marshal Kesselring and Excellency Fougier.

5) It gives the maximum effectiveness to the protection during daylight hours, but remains the problem of night protection for which the OBS It will make the maximum effort.

6) It is necessary that the committee studies a lot in detail the conduct of the convoys to see although it is possible to navigate some convoy during daylight hours only.

7) It is appropriate that the Royal Navy experience the cable rockets that the R. Aeronautica has available.

Marshal Kesselring -You agrees and is finally this:

1) That the notice of deficiency tonnage could use ships of the Spanish flag for traffic in the Aegean, in order to recover the ships who traffic in that area.

2) It would also be necessary to review the issue of barriers to Tobruk to make access to the safest haven.

General von Rintelen - exposes how to commission to the OK W. exposed to Marshal Cavallero on the issues considered.

The objectives are classified as follows:

1) Supply of the Armored Army.

2) Reinforcement of Gaeta and the Aegean.

3) Constitution of reserves in Tripoli.

4) Transfer of warships to the Levant.

The execution of this requires fuel oil. Supermarina according to Adm. Weichhold reviewed the situation and concluded that, if it comes to have available of 40,000 tons monthly, will be brought supplies in Africa only 50 percent, that is the only regular supplies of the Armored Army. To perform all the tasks it would take at least 60,000 tons monthly.

Romania, in winter, despite the aid that will be provided in coal and gas, they can not have more than 20,000 tons. In this regard note that to try at least not to reduce quotas in October and that they can reach 35,000 tons, is now in Bucharest a German mission.

The difference between what Romania can give and the needs of the Italian Navy that can not be filled by the German Navy, but does not know to what extent.

He noted to the O.K. W. these conclusions, but did not yet know the decisions.

*Excellency Fougier* - It that the same serious problem arises for R. Aeronautica that has only 11,000 tons monthly fuel against a requirement of 22,000 tons.

This deficiency means that you can not run schools and other important services. This fact affects and will affect more severely on the efficiency of the Royal Air Force. It will also discuss with Reich Marshal Goering.

COMMANDER ARMORED ARMY AFRICA  
THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF

1<sup>st</sup> Nr. 119/42 Secret for Command  
Reserved by means of official

Z.O., October 3, 1942

*To His Excellency the Marshal of Italy  
and Chief of the General Staff of the Comando Supremo Count Ugo Cavallero*

Mr. Marshall!

Allow me to extend to Your Excellency my warmest thanks for the radiogram of 1 October.

Field Marshal General Rommel discussed in great detail with me the situation of the Italian-German Armored Army. As his deputy in charge I agree with every point in his views. I think that the General Field Marshal Rommel has exhibited during his stay in Italy, both to you that the Duce, his opinion on the situation and the conclusions derived from it. Since then there have been no substantial changes in the situation. I just, then, that summarize the most important points:

1 - *The enemy* has behind the Nile Delta with its efficient ports and has therefore a convenient base for supplies and reinforcements of troops. The turnover of the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian and English 50<sup>th</sup> Divisions, we have assumed and communicated at the time, it did not occur. It must rather take into account that the opponent has made to flow in recent days to face new forces amounting to about 1-2 English divisions, 1 Greek brigade and less severe Yugoslav troops. You will need to count on turnout for further reinforcements. The heightened activity of the troops of exploration and bet English at Deir el Munassib are linked with the attempted landing at Tobruk, as well as with the attack the Oasis of Gialo; the supply of Kufra in progress and the British advance from the desert with director Benghazi are to be evaluated as preparations for an imminent major offensive.

2 - *The Italian-German Armored Army* against take all necessary steps to be able to successfully repel the great British offensive. The preconditions for rejecting a frontal attack on the positions of El Alamein are given substantially by the balance of forces. By staggering the defense in depth, which will be completed presumably on October 20, the effect of the intense preparation of artillery fire and expected opposing air strikes can be mitigated. This is of utmost importance to the fact that the enemy has a remarkable air supremacy and an almost inexhaustible amount of ammunition. For the current conduct of defensive action is by all means of preparing the

positions and to form through an exploration of a continuous framework possibly full of the enemy.

But it must also take into account the fact that the enemy will not be limited to launch *only a frontal attack* but that will land simultaneously on the North African coast in as *many points as possible* and will try also to penetrate, for example, starting from Kufra motorized units, *deep* in the side of the Army. I mentioned in the last interview with his Excellency Barbasetti importance of breaking in time that the starting position of the enemy by an attack from the ground and from the air. Against attempts to land of modest proportions, for example in the area Marsa Matruh- Tobruk, it has in my opinion sufficient defense forces. How far the preparations are insured defensive Benghazi by the troops of Deleuse are not able to realize. Allow me to point out on this occasion that the guarantee as to the *defense of Benghazi*, which is our most important naval base, is of *crucial importance*. If you were to arise in which the troops deployed for coastal defense in the Marsa Matruh- Tobruk be insufficient to reject attempts at landing by enemy forces should necessarily relevant to inject this purpose motorized units held in waiting position behind lines of defense. But then what would be inappropriate, because such forces would be allocated other duties in the event of a major offensive by the enemy.

3rd - The multiple tasks, mentioned in paragraph 2, to be carried out during a defensive action as much as possible the mobile, can be met on the part of the Italian-German Armored Army if it will have *large reserves of ammunition, fuel and provisions*. To Your Excellency will be well known that this is not the case currently. Therefore the utmost concern of the Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Rommel in January, and also mine, is that you reach a rapid, strong improvement in the supply situation, the completion of the units and the overseas transport of German reinforcements prepared in Italy. Field Marshal Rommel in January will have already exposed every detail even in this respect. I therefore fail to dwell on that issue.

4th - I fully agree with Field Marshal Rommel in January that it would no doubt necessary to prevent major offensive of the enemy by means of a *share of our attack*. This attack should have first targeting the annihilation of the 8th Army. Additional objectives would be prepared so the capture of Alexandria and later director of the operation with Cairo over the ownership of the Suez Canal. In the present conditions of the naval and air strategic situation in the Mediterranean I do not think can prepare in the near future time the means of supply and reinforcement units necessary to do so. I think on the other hand can take advantage of the success reported in rejecting a major British offensive action, proceeding from our action to counterattack. The objective of such action should be equally counter first the annihilation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army and the subsequent capture of Alexandria. If such an operation can be continued with the director of Cairo it can not be held up by this time. *Crucial* to the possibility of this transaction remains premised on a *powerful counteroffensive supply* of means of supply, and generally *intensifying refueling operations* is the *decisive issue in the further continuation* of the conduct of operations. Therefore may I express once again the need



that all the efforts of the military authorities concerned tend to achieve a radical improvement in the transport situation overseas.

I express the hope that we can proceed as soon as the staff making contact with Your Excellency referred to so many times and with the assurance of my highest consideration are

*Your Excellency's most devoted*  
STUMME

GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF LIBYA  
INSPECTOR GENERAL  
OF POLICE OF ITALIAN AFRICA

REPORT ON THE SERVICE OF CENSORSHIP THE FORTNIGHT  
OF THE MONTH October 1942 –XX

Tripoli, on 18 October 1942–XX

Dependent Troops Delegation of the Comando Supremo N.A.

MILITARY CORRESPONDENCE

Were reviewed No. 69,402 letters.

*Morale in general:* The review of the correspondence of the period under review did not reveal any new information, such as to change when exposed in the previous report, regarding the moral of the troops stationed in Cyrenaica and Egypt. Even in this fortnight we will reveal the same differences, the same contrasts in spiritual values, already reported in the previous fortnight.

A careful examination of the elements of judgment convinced that much plays on the morale of the troops to their long stay in Libya and still more the long and uninterrupted period of line.

The morale of the units recently arrived from Italy, can be called great. The excerpts of the military's "Folgore" for example, are almost entirely a source of expressions that reveal the finest military virtues.

For units instead of several months are subject to wear of the war and the hardships of the desert, the inevitable physical fatigue affects the military, most of the time, on their morale. Despite these negative values, of which we will discuss in more detail later, the morale of the troops on the whole, most say good.

General is the certainty of victory, long live the will to fight.

*Fighting spirit:* This feeling that the great days are buying the highest vitality, it stands out even in these quiet times, especially between departments freshest. Many are these days excerpts of the *Folgore* Division, which is still excited for the quote in the Bulletin of the Comando Supremo "... we have been cited in the bulletins of 3:04 .... we are all guys in their twenties and ready for anything. Until now we have had losses, but none of us has surrendered or gave himself a prisoner, all or injured or fallen on the field of honor ...".

There are cases of people who recently came online prove pleased to be part of advanced troops, as well as frequent are the cases of those who are ill-adapted to stay away from the front line, "... we chomping brake - writes an officer of the GG .FF. -The task of supervision is not for us and not looking forward to beginning the last leap ...".

*Esprit de corps:* Still alive is the spirit of attachment to their military

unit, the weapon, his own specialty. Many of the songs are always a letter revealing this feeling 'I'm all right ... in the middle of the riflemen, I would always stay there! Youth fire, devilish, heroic ... '.

*Military situation:* There were no important military events in this period, so the review of the correspondence does not allow to give a full review of this topic, given that the information obtained are very few and fragmentary.

Someone mentions the immensity of our preparations, making a parallel with the preparation of English that would be no less strong. Some other instead recognizes a priori the preponderance of English media, but offset by our higher moral qualities "... those dogs can make it big - writes a lieutenant of the 46th artigl. "Trento" - but fortunately if we lack the means, we are not lacking, however, the heart and the guts ... '.

Some few signs of signs of fatigue in both fields "... as the war do not know when you decide, we only know that we're a little tired, it will certainly be too, should no longer go so long ... '.

Some other finally finding our own war situation firmer in recent years and expresses the hope that it will renew the sad days, "... we hope that with the rains, the winter does not bring us down here the misfortunes and setbacks of 40 and 41 - said a corporal of the 1<sup>st</sup> Auto-group PM 210 -there is to be feared because we are strong and Tobruk is no longer behind .... "

Particular attention should be given some letters from the 42<sup>nd</sup> motorized bersaglieri battalion, in which they speak with conviction and confidence, peace negotiations currently underway "... today is the advice of the Pope and all the commanders of states I am at war and when I write I do know something of what they have decided ... ". And some other well of the same units, after having communicated to his relatives the news above, concludes: "... I end by telling you that I am convinced that soon all of us that we are in North Africa we come home because it's all over ... "

*Protests against shirkers and profiteers:* Complaints of this kind are certainly the most popular. Every soldier, regardless of rank, whatever may be his state of mind, enthusiastic or depressed, feel a spontaneous sense of rebellion and contempt for those who give little or no contribution to the country, in this enormous effort that it completes or that historical event of this supreme advantage to draw large and easy benefits: "... tell me that there are other references writes a military remained unknown-but do not tell me that classes call, let me know, explain yourself, it is also now I call and all that you face over once and for all, that we are not always the ones that are at the front ... and then come home and catch us to pay that we were the suckers ... '.

Still alive is the sense of resentment for the poor understanding of the hardships and difficulties of a war that has this front: "... by my companions who have returned from Italy, I learned that he speaks pretty badly of some of the N.A fighters writes a young fascist to the mother we're here to kill us, to risk our lives in every second and there speak wrong ... I would not kill anything because avenge the heroes who lie in the desert with a rugged cross above.

*Subsidies:* Always numerous and vibrate are complaints about the elimination of the subsidies. The discomfort and worries push anybody to inveigh against those who believe because of family economic disturbance "... I would like to talk to Mr.

Podestà, I would like to ask how do poor old of 62 and 67 years old, alone, with no income, no nothing and no bread. Where are the words of our Duce? How can we keep up morale when home leave our mothers to die of hunger? Every step I take I curse the lords communal agents, the fault is theirs, because they do not bother to investigate, at random ... withdraw the subsidy. "

*Food difficulties in Italy:* More and more frequently become the excerpts that discuss this topic: "... I feel that the food and other things are always increasing in price by an engineer writes PM 210/A -You say that if this continues is something exaggerated, I say that if this continues they starve all the poor people .... "

Concerns would now compounded by the news that they would be considered poor agricultural production this year, "... I received a letter from a young fascist Tomassi writes -in which I learned his deep regret at the lack of harvest ... " ; other military hint at numerous evasions to clusters of agricultural products "... I know also writes another young fascist -that the gentlemen settlers have stolen cereals, wheat etc. then reselling this stuff at hyperbolic prices ... ".

*Licenses and alternations:* the situation remains unchanged on the licensing and the rotations. Much has been said in previous reports, about the state of mind that this important issue arouses in all the fighting. The worm of nostalgia, the physical exhaustion and moral -after a certain residence in N.A. and worse still online - a grip on almost all of the military.

These days we have the impression that there is between the soldiers *a greater sense of confidence about the solution* to this state of affairs, "... we do not want to leave, or to come home a soldier writes of "Ariete" -but at least a small license and then return. After we are always ready to go back to fight and do our duty. However, it is useless to talk about this topic. So here there is no justice ... "sense of distrust that pervades even those who had hoped for a speedy implementation of the provisions that reduced to 24 months stay in N.A. "... I had to come in a tank crewman license he writes of "Ariete" - I understand they are more than two years I come down here and just as good when they told me to keep myself ready, have been closed. You understand that make fun of? What they were afraid of losing the war if missing thirty or forty soldiers throughout the division? The lose instead if so demoralize the soldiers! I do not feel more than get by ... ".

Someone makes the comparison with the treatment of license made to the military in the last European war "... in the last war writes a Sgt. Maj. by P.M. 210/A -I remember that Dad sometimes came home on leave to see his children and then returned happy and again did his duty, and things seemed less harsh, you think? ... '.

Particularly worthy of note are the complaints of certain military's "Folgore". It is a group of items already in Libya for over two years and recently assigned to the division above. They fear they will not be able to take notes for the provisions that are framed in a unit just arrived from Italy.

*Discipline and comradeship:* The correspondence confirms that balances the bonds of comradeship among our soldiers and have excellent relationships with the German army soldiers. Special mention writes as a sergeant in the command of the division "Trento" Printing the books of contemporary politics and economics-Rome - "... today came to the division one of your envelope containing some

photos ... there seemed really expensive that of Field Marshal Rommel. It is the desire of soldiers to have a few copies to remember ... ".

*Sanitary conditions:* The causes of the grievances of the military have been reported with the previous reports. Still there are many cases of Enterocolitis between units of the front of Egypt, while the GG. FF., Accuse the sensitive frequency of cases of a disease almost epidemic "... I am now being powerful fevers that doctors do not even know that it comes from them ...." Some young Fascist believes that it is not malaria, and that will be resolved quite well and expeditiously as hit almost all "... came two companies of the 30th Battalion. But poor 3/4 of them have fallen ill ... ».

Frequently are also letters that speak of scarcity of water, someone mentions the danger of scorpions and vipers very numerous in the desert, while some other complains because military doctors would not give due importance to the diseases suffered "... to be hospitalized and treated - he writes more of "Trento" -You sure you are dying, otherwise with a pill you heathen .. ".

*Rations:* A few excerpts and even conflicting. Someone expresses satisfaction with the rations good and plentiful "... about eating every day we have soup, pasta or rice writes a man of "Trieste" - the bread remains always a loaf for the morning to put in coffee. .. ", refers instead to some other bad packaging and finally anybody complain to the monotony of the canned meat.

*Postal service - Censorship:* From the amount of complaints, which every day becomes more and more vibrate one has the impression that the disruption post go increasingly worsening.

In recent days especially, mail coming from the wards to the front is a chorus of protests; there is no doubt that this has a negative impact on the morale of the troops' morale goes down ... - writes a sergeant of the 46th artigl. "Trento" - it depends on the employees in charge for this service ... should come here to see what damage they do to all the soldiers, with their lack of interest ... ".

Each question is the cause of this irregularity and hinting that he may be a manifestation of anti-fascism "... the fact is - says a lieutenant of the 8th Regs. Bersaglieri - that during the visit made by DUCE lately in N.A. It was set by Italy that the correspondence was to be delivered to us fighters within 48 -72 hours, irony, since that day the postal service has not been adjusted ... ".

Continue always numerous complaints, have repeatedly reported to the malfunctioning of the money order service and the resulting distress for families for which remittances combatants, very often they represent the only means of subsistence.

Are somewhat diminished complaints to the parcel.

He complained about the lack of stamps and everybody of the non-arrival of the newspapers.

Offices censorship report the rather large amount of letters daily -in compliance with current provisions - must be removed of course, because missing the name and address of the sender. Issue of letters written by soldiers to their relatives, in which just about arguments of a family and for which there would be no reason to keep hidden the identity of the sender. It is therefore considered that the recent requirements are known to all and therefore would be useful a greater spread of that requirement.

### GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Good overall morale among the troops of the Egyptian front, particularly high among units recently arrived in Libya; signs of fatigue among those who most feel the hardships of war.

General is the certainty of victory, particularly alive the spirit of the body and the fighting.

Attacks continue against ambush and against those that derive from the war large and easy benefits.

Always numerous complaints to the removal of subsidies and the widespread concern about the difficulties in Italian food.

A few hints to the military situation, while it detects the spread of rumors about alleged peace negotiations.

Increasingly numerous and vibrant complaints about denial of licenses and alternations.

Good overall discipline and excellent ties of comradeship, even with the soldiers of the Germanic army.

Many accuse intestinal disorders and among the troops stationed in the oasis of Siwa you have several cases of intermittent fevers.

Conflicting judgments on rations. Note always complaints about the distribution of canned meat and water scarcity.

Strong protests by the postal service and the money order service. Reduce complaints for parcels.

They did not notice events contrary to war and his conduct political military.

THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

(Major General P.A.I. -U. Presti)

MINUTES OF THE MEETING TOOK PLACE ON 27 OCTOBER, 1942  
AT THE PALAZZO VENEZIA BETWEEN THE DUCE, THE HEAD OF THE GS GENERAL,  
MARSHAL GOERING AND MARSHAL KESSELRING

Topics:

Review the situation in I.N A. and in the Mediterranean.

Marshal Kesselring informs that until the time of his departure the situation was good. It expresses some doubts about the attitude of Marshal Rommel that he judges undecided.

Marshal Goering intervenes, saying that sometimes it seems that the Marshal Rommel to bear the impressions of the moment and change too easily his views, but in reality it is not. He adds that there are reasons to think that the Armored Army does not hold, provided they get timely supplies.

Marshal Kesselring agrees and ensures that he will personally take an interest in the departure of the tanker "Luisiana".

Influx of German Air Force. The Marshal Goering refers to three groups of planes, but not well clarifies whether it is new or turnout of movements of forces existing in Italy.

Transport for I.A.S. Both the Marshal Goering as Marshal Kesselring are unanimous in recognizing our efforts. Marshal Goering added that sends a group of Ju 52 from Russia in order to arrive at a transport of 200 tons. fuel daily and asks what we can do in this regard.

The Head of G.S. General says that putting together all that we can get to 50 aircraft that is a transport of 100 tons. fuel.

Marshal Kesselring promises to give fuel to the engine.

Transport by submarines. Marshal Goering informs that in Germany are under construction Subs with cargo of 900 tons.

He offers the construction plans.

The Head of G.S. General informs that already more than six years had studied the issue and currently we have in building two 600 tons. (Actually they are 4).

The Duce intervenes and orders the G.S. under construction are drawn to 6. Also provides that 10 of the current submarines are available for fuel transport. The Chief of General Staff noted the danger of fumes and Marshal Goering excludes. He says that the Navy is conservative and that we must overcome this resistance. To transport the maximum tonnage suggests removing the torpedoes and limit the crew at most.

The Head of G.S. General informs then that did make available the 3 Navy destroyers for transport of fuel.

Marshal Goering and particularly Marshal Kesselring (who did not know it) say they are very pleased with this decision.

Dispatch of Hitler delivered by Dr. Ley. The Duce give notice of this dispatch and Marshal Goering informs that the Führer will stay until 31 October at Q.G and then he will travel to Monaco. Subsequently he will like to meet the Duce at the Brenner.

The Duce expressed the desire that the meeting take place in Berchtesgaden.



REPORT OF RELEASE  
THE TALK OF ROMMEL-BARBASETTI ON 29 OCTOBER 1942

DELEGATION  
OF THE  
COMANDO SUPREMO  
IN NORTH AFRICA  
(RELEASE)  
*General Staff*

N. SD / 196 of prot.

P.M. 27, on 29 October, 1942

*Confidential personal – Secret*

Topic: Interview today.

*To Mr Marshal of Italy, Chief of General Staff General*  
Following today's telegram to reply to your 3325.

I am referring quite closely (because taking notes) and without comment as I said today 29<sup>th</sup> personal note:

"Our divisions can not resist the British attacks that are made with huge superiority in aviation, very strong in heavy tanks and heavy (although they have been destroyed 300 are left in 1500); strong in artillery, and especially in ammunition so that the British make fire drumming for several hours. By these means, the enemy was able to occupy the area safety and part of that resistance.

Attacks continued for several days have inflicted heavy losses, for which the German units are very weak; the rest went into action with actual already reduced. Similarly it happened to the Italian troops, especially for the "Trento".

If the opponent will continue so, it has no hope of supporting the fight and block his way westward. The enemy will go through its mass engulfing the few forces that will remain; It has already used the reserve and only art of juggling you can not close the holes. In front of the south it is second in line only 1' "Ariete " with a couple of German batteries. To the north it is in the second line "Trieste", but must now be brought to the first group to release one of the two German for mobile use.

Tanks available only 60-70 Germans; 160 Italian, but this, that while they do well, they need support and artillery can not always oppose the British tanks. It must in any case be stated that, despite all inferiority, Italian and German every soldier does his duty. Then the impression that we approach the end of the Army, which in the current conditions will be overwhelmed.

The issue of supply is not the only reason for this exceptional crisis, but with a decisive improvement in supplies, the crisis may ease. And if you can not resolve the issue of supplies and the enemy continues to attack, the end would be very close: only two or three days there would remain life. There could be saved with a use of large quantities of German ammunition that must be carried by air. If this happens, you could hold the front even despite the

superiority of British tanks. Overall, therefore, there are high hopes of resistance.

And what would happen if the front would break and was beaten this army, of which he is the commander Duce (acting under the orders of the Duce)? He longs that the Duce is made aware of this huge crisis we are experiencing. From the front of the Egyptian border, there are only two battalions and a recon units; there is the garrisons of Siwa and a battalion of Libya. In Cyrenaica there is, of course, a little strength: even Bardia and Tobruk would hold little. To do insignificant on troops of services, which would withdraw. You can not break the fighting to escape the opponent; regardless of the scarcity of troops that might withdraw, missing gasoline for the maneuver. There is not the solution to give battle to the extreme on the front of El Alamein.

The seriousness of this situation had already been seen in a long time and had been informed the competent authorities of Rome and Berlin. Certainly the crisis stems from difficulties supplies. He instead asked eight units of fire and thirty fuel; the situation is known: he wondered why they imagined already the hardness of future fights. In early September he had already done experiment about the planes and the amount of ammunition enemy.

In late September he left for the offensive with a heavy heart, because the troops were not complete, missing gasoline and had little ammunition. On that occasion there were also deceived the enemy troops, and, contrary to what the Marshal Kesselring had assured, aviation English gave us sensitive disorders. Unfortunately, in September and October, then he came little to the German troops. Despite this inferiority of means, the German soldier will do his duty to the end (and so will the Italian one, I said) and the Marshal himself will give his all for the resistance.

If the enemy were to break through on the northern front, he would try with all available forces to attack from the south: what will happen as a result he can not now predict.

The current crisis will be fatal if the enemy will last other days 2,00 to 3,00 with the current pace: it is essential to lighten the plane for sending large amounts of ammunition, because if they consume in excess of our arrival; We need petrol, because today the limited availability forces you to keep the tanks stop or limit the movements to not then remain stationary; and men are needed, because the ranks are depleted. It takes just five-six thousand German men with its armament: 30,000 will be needed later."

The noted person asked that the above (which I was told in confidence, only present Mancinelli and Westphal) is provided only to the Duce, to Marshal Cavallero and remain strictly secret.

I note we do not comment contradictions.

At the end of his speech he told the Marshal which is the program of the expected arrivals (sheets brought from Major Pistotti). He said that as long as the fuel and ammo are not in Libya there can count and can therefore not rely on these programs, which, in fact, did not even move.

I asked what aid Delease wanted to: he, unlike in the past, I made no special request, in addition to gasoline and tanks and maritime transport reported by Major Otto day before yesterday and I all met; He added that

Deleuse can not give what it does not have and now it's a very large, that just depends on Rome.

I have also examined, in the interview, the logistical situation Italian: and I pointed out that it was not as catastrophic as that which he attributed to his troops; and he has had relief.

As for my opinion I will say that I have gathered from the news is no doubt that the crisis is very strong and can also become very serious, given the great superiority of the means put into action the opponent over our vehicles and aircraft (even today there we found in the presence of air strikes in the area advanced) and the possibility that it seems the opponent has to feed the battle with fresh troops, while the Italian and German units - especially in the north - already understaffed before the battle, after they five days suffered a strong failure.

But, touched so this operational part that is not my responsibility, I will say that I believe that any measure, especially not too small size, can be implemented in the way he wanted to, can serve to raise the confidence of Marshal that, among another, abandoned the tactic outreach of armored units he used in his brilliant actions in June and July and is limited - to issue of fuel -for actions within very limited, that are unlikely to have significant results.

*The General Head of the Delegation*  
Curio Barbasetti Prun

(\*) Must be considered "late August" because it refers to the battle of Alam el Halfa (30 August to 5 September 1942)

ORDER OF OPERATIONS OF THE 8<sup>TH</sup> ARMY  
FOR "SUPERCHARGE"

Secret  
October 30, 1942

PLAN OF THE 8<sup>TH</sup> ARMY

1. - Operation Supercharge will take place in the night between October 31 and November 1. The operation is aimed at:

- a) Destroy armored forces.
- b) Forcing the enemy to fight in the open and then force him to consume fuel, with continuous and constant movement.
- c) Cut off the supply lines of the enemy and prevent the movement of logistics services.
- d) Let the enemy fall back from his airstrips and his advanced airports.
- e) Induce the complete disintegration of the opposing army, with the combination of a), b), c) and d).

Tasks of the 30 Corps

2. -Attack at night, from the present forward positions, between the squares 297 and 301 north. Attack and penetrate to the west, to a depth of 4 kilometers.

3. - Once reached the final objectives, patrols and armored infantry push it further to the west, in order to ensure the outlet of the armored divisions, allowing them to flow and to explain more easily.

4. - The sides of the penetration are kept firmly and their eastern ends are definitely connected with our current positions.

5. -All the area of penetration is cleared and organized in order to allow freedom of movement and is held firmly by you establish a solid basis from which to develop offensive operations.

Operations of the 10th Army Corps

6. -The 10th Corp will break into the open, through the corridor made from 30<sup>th</sup> Corps.

7. -Armored Cars, initially at least two regiments, will be launched through the head area of the bridge, before the dawn of November, and will push the northwest, west, southwest and south.

Their task will be to operate offensively on supply lines of the enemy, to destroy everything they encounter and prevent supplies or reinforcements arrive from the rear.

The armored cars will have to be prepared to act on their own for a few days, interrupting supplies of the enemy and using widely fuel and supplies of the enemy.

8. - The 10<sup>th</sup> Corp should ensure, as a first objective, the whole area of which at Pt. 46 in 858299 - Tell El Aqqaqir in 860297. The operations should be developed to:

- a) destroy armored forces.
- b) result in the complete disintegration of the enemy rear.

9. -The Chief Operations 10<sup>th</sup> Corps, subject to the fulfillment of the task in the first paragraph 8 (a), will aim to 40 south-west towards the station Ghazala, so as to surround the enemy forces in area of Sidi Rahman and cut them off.

10. -The progression of 10<sup>th</sup> Corps will be calculated so that the consolidation takes place on the first goal before the dawn of 1 November, and the operations can start from that area to the rising of the sun.

11. -Both clearly understood that, if the 30th body could not achieve the ultimate goal, set out in paragraphs 2 and 3, the armored divisions of the 10th Army Corps will open the gate to reach the first goal.

#### 10th and 30th Army Corps

12. -The 30<sup>th</sup> Corp will take the division New Zealander to take up the first goal of the 10<sup>th</sup> Corps (see paragraph 8), in order to free up the 10th Army Corps for offensive operations against the armored forces, or for moving to the northwest toward the station Ghazala.

13. -During the whole operation required frequent contacts, and cooperation links between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 30<sup>th</sup> Corp.

14. -This transaction, if successful, will result in the complete disintegration of the enemy and lead to its eventual destruction.

It must, therefore, be crowned with success.

Resolute action to control will be vital; complete confidence in the plan and its success will be vital; there must be no hesitation; the risk must be accepted in full; not allowed "grumbling."

I appeal to all commanders to ensure that this operation is carried out with determination, so that their units fight courageously and to install in all grades optimism and offensive spirit.

*Supercharge* we will achieve victory.

#### 13th Army Corps

15. -The 13<sup>th</sup> Corp will endeavor, on the southern side, before or after the early evening of 31 October, to give the impression to the enemy that an attack is about to be launched on that side.

16. -The Army Corps will be held ready to enter immediately into action as soon as it is clear that the enemy is about to fall.

*Army Reserves*

17. -7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division (less the 4th Arm. Light Brigade), 131st Infantry Brigade (Queens).

These two teams will be held in reserve, ready for use, according to the developments of the situation.

*R.A.F. Operations*

18. - The R.A.F. It has a pivotal part in inflicting the enemy moral and material damages. This part will be intensified from tomorrow onwards and will reach its climax when launched *Supercharge*.

*Conclusion*

19. -We know all the sources of information that the enemy is in critical condition and that his situation is difficult. The ongoing offensive of the 8th Army and the RAF they have to limit with under such conditions that a blow inflicted now complete its route.

First stage of the action is the action that starts tonight, on the northern side, the 9<sup>th</sup> Australian division; its success will have great impact on the success of *Supercharge*.

How to *Supercharge*, tomorrow night 31 October - 1 November, it will be the second tee shot deadly, a blow from which I feel that the enemy will not be able to recover.

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 4<sup>th</sup> *Livorno* Inf. Div., 122.  
 10<sup>th</sup> *Piave* Inf. Div., 630.  
 11<sup>th</sup> *Brennero* Inf. Div., 485.  
 16<sup>th</sup> *Pistoia* Inf. Div., 485, 549, 550, 556, 568, 619, 668, 788.  
 17<sup>th</sup> *Pavia* Inf. Div., 18, 25, 29, 41, 70, 71, 73, 107, 112, 115-117, 162, 195, 204, 221, 226, 229, 256, 259, 260, 262, 305, 323, 340, 353, 366, 367, 400, 403, 404, 443, 446, 452, 456, 458, 474, 475, 477-479,



- 482, 483, 490, 493, 512, 564, 568, 619, 668, 670, 673, 745, 771, 801, 816, 829.
- 25<sup>th</sup> *Bologna* Inf. Div., 18, 40, 46, 71, 102, 112-114, 340, 480, 485, 564, 568-570, 574, 591, 668, 728, 771, 779, 780, 801, 803, 812, 816, 833.
- 27<sup>th</sup> *Brescia* Inf. Div., 18, 29, 46, 71, 83, 107, 112, 115-117, 162, 195, 198, 204, 226, 229, 256, 259, 260, 281, 282, 305, 306, 312, 321, 328, 338, 353, 366, 367, 403, 423, 437, 443, 452, 453, 458, 474-479, 482, 483, 486, 490, 493, 495, 500, 512, 553, 564, 569, 570, 574, 591, 598, 663, 668, 673, 680, 771, 801, 816.
- 60<sup>th</sup> *Sabratha* Inf. Div., 18, 22, 23, 25, 29, 40, 41, 46, 47, 52, 53, 55, 59, 61, 68, 70, 71, 73, 76, 112, 114, 161, 162, 195, 204, 225, 226, 259, 282, 305, 312, 366, 367, 408, 458, 462, 464, 466, 467, 480, 482, 484, 485, 487.
- 80<sup>th</sup> *Spezia* Inf. Div., 122, 630, 788.
- 101<sup>st</sup> *Trieste* Mot. Div., 18, 20, 23, 29, 40, 41, 46, 55, 59, 63, 65, 66, 68, 75, 76, 83, 112, 162, 194-199, 201-204, 212, 213, 216, 219, 221, 225, 231, 236, 243, 250-252, 256, 262, 270, 275, 276, 305, 306, 312, 321, 323, 324, 328, 334, 335, 353, 362, 367, 397, 404, 410, 439, 443, 444, 446, 448, 452, 458, 461-464, 467, 480-482, 484, 490, 497, 507, 512, 547, 564, 569, 582, 585, 590, 593, 594, 596-598, 606, 607, 631, 653, 665, 667, 673, 680, 681, 711, 752, 769, 771, 776, 777, 780, 786, 792-795, 801, 802, 815, 818, 833.
- 102<sup>nd</sup> *Trento* Inf. Div., 20, 29, 41, 70, 71, 73, 112, 114-162, 195, 204, 225, 226, 229, 256, 260, 305, 312, 330, 340, 341, 366, 398, 408, 432, 443, 458, 461, 463-466, 479-482, 484, 490, 499, 500, 507, 509, 553, 564, 568, 569, 591, 594, 668, 670, 673, 681, 743, 750, 754, 756, 758, 761, 771, 780, 801, 803, 812, 833, 860, 875.
- 131<sup>st</sup> *Centauro* Arm. Div., 95, 112, 630.
- 132<sup>nd</sup> *Ariete* Arm. Div., 18, 20, 23, 29, 38, 41, 42, 46, 52, 53, 55, 59, 63, 65, 66, 68, 75, 83, 89, 107, 111, 112, 162, 194-196, 198-203, 206, 208, 212, 213, 216-219, 221, 223, 225, 229, 231, 236, 242, 243, 245-250, 252, 270, 272, 275, 276, 306, 312, 314, 321, 323-325, 328, 335-337, 346, 362, 367, 397, 401, 404, 407, 410, 412, 443, 444, 446, 448, 451, 453, 458, 476, 479, 482, 483, 490, 497, 512, 547, 564, 569, 582-585, 590, 593-596, 598, 606, 607, 609, 631, 653, 670, 673, 681, 693, 695, 711, 751-753, 756, 759, 766, 769, 771, 795, 801-803, 812, 815, 818, 826, 827.
- 133<sup>rd</sup> *Littorio* Arm. Div., 95, 111, 112, 119, 196, 310, 312, 314, 362, 367, 397, 400, 402-408, 410, 411, 430, 432, 437, 447, 450, 451, 456-458, 462, 464, 476, 479, 482, 484, 490, 497, 512, 547, 551, 564, 569, 582, 583, 585, 590, 593, 597, 598, 606-609, 631, 653, 670, 673, 675, 693, 711, 742, 744, 748, 756, 759, 764-769, 771, 780, 791, 793-795, 802, 803, 812, 815, 818, 822, 826, 827, 833.
- 136<sup>th</sup> *Giovani Fascisti* Arm. Div., 485, 551, 568, 631, 668, 683.
- 185<sup>th</sup> *Folgore* Parachute Div., 122, 549-551, 553, 564, 569, 570, 585, 591, 604, 606, 609, 619, 646, 663, 668, 678, 680, 731, 734, 736, 740, 745, 746, 750, 751, 756, 771, 801, 816.

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- 19<sup>th</sup> *Brescia* Infantry, 260, 328, 329, 458, 474, 475, 486, 493, 495, 591, 668, 680.
- 20<sup>th</sup> *Brescia* Infantry, 226, 260, 328, 329, 366, 474, 475, 493, 668, 680.
- 27<sup>th</sup> *Pavia* Infantry, 260, 458, 474, 476, 680.
- 28<sup>th</sup> *Pavia* Infantry, 458, 476, 477, 680, 750.
- 39<sup>th</sup> *Bologna* Infantry, 668, 681.
- 40<sup>th</sup> *Bologna* Infantry, 668, 681.
- 61<sup>st</sup> *Trento* Infantry, 257, 366, 458, 480, 499, 668, 681, 766.
- 65<sup>th</sup> *Trieste* Infantry, 20, 201, 225, 253, 255, 323, 324, 328, 458, 606, 681, 780, 792, 793, 796.
- 66<sup>th</sup> *Trieste* Infantry, 20, 225, 235, 253, 323, 324, 328, 458, 481, 606, 681, 792, 796, 812.
- 85<sup>th</sup> *Sabratha* Infantry, 458, 460.
- 86<sup>th</sup> *Sabratha* Infantry, 458, 460.
- 186<sup>th</sup> *Folgore* Infantry, 570, 609, 670, 680.
- 187<sup>th</sup> *Folgore* Infantry, 570, 591, 604, 607,
- 7<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, 20, 259, 305, 366, 367, 435, 437, 460, 461, 464, 668, 682, 816.
- 8<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, 20, 65, 196, 221, 245, 249, 323, 324, 328, 444, 497, 681.

9<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, 20, 65, 75, 226, 260, 305, 328,353,366,367,443,458,474,680.  
 12<sup>th</sup> Bersaglieri, 404, 410, 458, 497, 812.  
 132<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Tank, 20, 196, 208, 212, 221, 245, 247, 249, 328, 444, 497, 681, 812.  
 133<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Tank 88 412 497 791, 795, 812.

*Giovani Fascisti* Regiment, 683.

*S. Marco* Regiment, 122, 126, 127, 133.

Raggruppamento *Ruspoli*, 731, 745, 750.

1<sup>st</sup> Quick Artillery, 198, 366, 412, 458, 474 680

3<sup>rd</sup> Quick Artillery, 366, 367, 437, 458, 460.

21<sup>st</sup> Artillery *Trieste*, 458, 681, 793, 812,

26<sup>th</sup> Artillery *Pavia*, 458, 680.

46<sup>th</sup> Artillery *Trento*, 366, 367, 458, 463, 486, 681.

132<sup>nd</sup> Artillery *Ariete*, 198,221,237,444, 681, 812.

136<sup>th</sup> Artillery *Giovani Fascisti*, 683.

185<sup>th</sup> Artillery *Folgore*, 680.

205<sup>th</sup> Artillery *Bologna*, 681.

8<sup>th</sup> raggruppamento artiglieria d'armata, 42 682

16<sup>th</sup> raggruppamento artiglieria d'armata, 472.

#### R. AERONAUTICA

5<sup>th</sup> Aerial Fleet, 12, 21, 59, 128, 158, 168, 179, 378, 534, 537, 538, 573, 574, 612, 619, 661, 673, 712, 871.

1<sup>st</sup> Fighter stormo, 180.

2<sup>nd</sup> Fighter stormo, 180.

3<sup>rd</sup> Fighter stormo, 573, 712.

4<sup>th</sup> Fighter stormo, 130, 180, 574,712.

15<sup>th</sup> Fighter stormo, 612.

50<sup>th</sup> Assult stormo, 180,574.

35<sup>th</sup> Bomber stormo, 180

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Major units included:

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*PanzergruppeAfrika*, 11, 18, 21-23,27,29, 31-33, 37, 40, 42, 44, 46, 82, 84, 99, 871.

*Deutsches Afrikakorps* (DAK), 18, 20, 22, 23, 25, 27, 38, 40, 45-47, 53, 55, 57, 59, 61, 65, 68, 70, 71, 76, 82, 84, 107, 108, 110, 111, 115, 117, 121, 149, 162, 164, 166, 174, 179, 181, 195, 201, 202, 205, 206, 213, 216-221, 223, 227-231, 234, 236, 239, 240, 242, 245, 261, 268, 272, 274-276, 280, 282, 304-307, 310, 323-326, 328, 334-339, 342, 344, 346, 358, 363, 366-369, 384, 395, 397, 400, 402-405, 407, 410, 411, 430, 432, 434, 435, 437-441 443, 444, 446-441, 452, 453, 456, 477, 479, 481, 483, 484, 490, 523, 534, 550, 553, 562, 564, 565, 568-570, 581-585, 587, 589, 590, 592, 593, 595, 596, 598, 608, 609, 614-617, 620, 650, 667, 672-675, 682, 684, 688, 694, 742, 744, 746, 747, 764, 765, 771, 781, 788, 791-797, 801, 802, 806-811, 815, 818, 823,831, 833, 835, 859, 875.

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164<sup>th</sup> Light Inf. Div., 461, 469, 485, 507, 553, 562, 568, 569, 587, 591, 618, 668, 670, 675, 683, 695, 742, 754, 756, 761, 771, 780,792,793, 801, 818, 833, 836, 860.

15<sup>th</sup> *Panzerdivision*, 18, 38, 42, 46, 47, 57, 83, 142, 195, 213, 215-219, 221, 223, 227, 228, 231, 234, 240, 243, 245-250, 253, 262, 270, 272, 275, 280, 282, 304-307, 314, 321, 325, 327, 330, 334, 362, 369,397-401,404, 407, 430, 432, 435, 437, 439, 441, 443, 447, 450, 452, 461, 471, 476-480, 490, 497, 562, 567, 569, 583, 584, 587, 589, 593, 598, 600, 614, 653, 670, 673, 675, 682, 693, 711, 742, 744,748,756,759,764,768,771,780, 790, 792-794, 803, 809, 812, 822, 826, 827.

21<sup>st</sup> *Panzerdivision*, 18, 42, 46, 57, 65, 83, 142, 194, 195, 202, 206, 213, 215-219,

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15<sup>th</sup> *Schutzen* brigade, 162, 166, 167, 195, 204, 219, 227, 229, 259, 282, 305, 314, 316, 321, 328, 329, 338.

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Raggruppamento Hecker, 195, 227, 256.

Raggruppamento Marcks, 18, 40, 42, 45, 53, 59, 63, 65, 66, 68-71, 84.

Raggruppamento Menton, 253, 404, 469, 476, 490, 497, 667, 683.

Raggruppamento Wolz, 247, 248.

Gruppo Briel, 476, 507, 509.

Gruppo Burkhardt, 18, 29.

Gruppo Deumiller, 18.

Gruppo Klehl, 482, 507, 736.

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X *Fliegerkorps*, 12, 121, 123, 134, 611.

19<sup>th</sup> Flak Division, 569, 683.

22<sup>nd</sup> Ramcke Parachute Brigade, 485, 569, 570, 598, 606, 663, 683, 802, 834-836.

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8<sup>th</sup> Army, 16, 27, 29, 53, 58, 60, 62, 67, 84, 114, 119, 128, 136, 137, 140, 141, 152, 160, 179, 182, 185, 187, 188, 193, 222, 228, 230, 234, 238, 240, 261, 266-268, 272, 276, 278, 299-306, 308, 309, 316, 330-333, 343, 347, 361, 363, 369, 371, 379, 381, 383, 385-390, 394, 395, 398, 402, 403, 410, 411, 414, 415, 421-426, 429, 430, 433, 434, 441, 449, 464, 467, 470, 484, 489, 505, 506, 509, 523-534, 565, 566, 570, 576, 579, 581, 584, 600, 601, 615, 617, 618, 640, 645, 648, 649, 654, 655, 661, 662, 673, 675-678, 686, 691, 694, 697, 702-706, 711, 719, 729, 732, 744, 758, 760, 769, 776, 786, 793-796, 811, 819, 823, 827, 832, 837, 838, 850, 852, 854, 855, 859-861, 877.

9<sup>th</sup> Army, 17, 382, 387, 505, 526.

10<sup>th</sup> Army, 17, 274, 276, 382, 387, 526, 527.

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10<sup>th</sup> Corps, 392, 394-398, 401, 403, 406-410, 412, 426, 430, 471, 529, 530, 595, 687, 688, 691-694, 697, 701-704, 712, 730, 738, 740-745, 751, 780, 790, 794, 807, 809, 824, 832, 833.

13<sup>th</sup> Corps, 27, 29, 31, 42, 44, 47, 55, 57, 59, 65, 66, 78, 84, 137, 161, 166, 176, 181, 188-192, 215, 217, 218, 221, 228, 235, 238-242, 259, 261, 272, 274, 276-281, 303, 308, 317, 320, 339, 347, 384, 392, 395, 402, 403, 406, 407, 413, 415, 426, 429, 430, 432, 439, 440, 449, 456, 458, 471, 477, 492, 496-498, 526, 533, 565, 576, 579, 585, 595, 665, 686, 688, 691, 693, 695, 697, 702, 704, 719, 730, 731, 740, 745, 752, 761, 806, 834.

30<sup>th</sup> Corps, 29, 55, 87, 137, 161, 176, 181, 188, 189, 205, 215, 216, 228, 239, 240, 269, 272, 303, 308, 310, 345, 388, 426, 429, 439, 443, 448, 453, 456, 458, 492, 498, 505, 526, 533, 565, 576, 579, 581, 595, 686, 688, 693, 695, 698, 701-704, 719, 721, 738, 740, 741, 744, 751, 761, 762, 769, 771, 780, 787, 790, 794, 832, 833.

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1<sup>st</sup> British Inf. Div., 666.

18<sup>th</sup> British Inf. Div., 17.

41<sup>st</sup> British Inf. Div., 490.

44<sup>th</sup> British Inf. Div., 267, 309, 388, 523, 576, 579, 591-593, 665, 686, 687, 695, 698, 730, 731, 740, 751, 757, 759.

50<sup>th</sup> British Inf. Div., 109, 137, 161, 176, 184, 188, 189, 216, 218, 221, 222, 238, 269, 277, 278, 280, 281, 300, 302, 303, 308, 320, 339, 369, 384, 386, 392, 395, 397, 398, 401, 404, 412, 430, 443, 456,

565, 566, 594, 686, 687, 698, 751, 757, 762, 780.

51<sup>st</sup> British Inf. Div., 678, 686, 695, 698, 723, 740, 742, 757, 758, 762, 765, 768, 777, 780, 785, 806, 807.

56<sup>th</sup> British Inf. Div., 490.

70<sup>th</sup> British Inf. Div., 138.

1<sup>st</sup> British Arm. Div., 23, 29, 33, 40, 44, 45, 47, 57, 59-63, 65, 66, 76, 78, 82, 84, 87, 109, 157, 161, 166, 176, 177, 179, 188, 191, 192, 215-217, 221, 222, 234, 235, 239, 269, 272, 274, 280, 300, 307, 333, 369, 386, 392, 395, 397, 398, 401-407, 410, 413, 426, 429, 430, 432-434, 441, 447, 452, 453, 471, 472, 476, 477, 493, 566, 687, 688, 697, 712, 729, 730, 743, 748, 752, 757, 762, 764, 768, 769, 771,

2<sup>nd</sup> British Arm. Div, 83, 87, 382, 383.

7<sup>th</sup> British Arm. Div, 23, 29, 84, 137, 142, 161, 166, 176, 177, 179, 188, 191, 205, 211, 213, 215-218, 222, 234, 239, 242, 247, 250, 269, 274, 279, 283, 307, 314, 330, 345, 365, 369, 384, 386, 392, 395, 397, 404, 407, 412, 456, 471, 481, 493, 497, 504, 525, 533, 566, 567, 576, 579, 581, 582, 585, 587, 592, 600, 687, 688, 693, 695- 697, 712, 730, 731, 734, 736, 740, 745, 756, 761, 780, 794, 807, 812.

8<sup>th</sup> British Arm. Div, 309, 382, 386, 450, 492, 592, 687, 697, 703, 757, 785.

10<sup>th</sup> British Arm. Div, 137, 266, 386, 493, 566, 579, 592, 593, 594, 616, 687, 694, 697, 712, 729, 730, 740-743, 748, 752, 757, 762, 768, 769, 785, 807.

4<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Div., 29, 31, 40, 53, 57, 61, 67, 78, 84, 222, 686, 699, 728, 762.

5<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Div., 176, 179, 188, 222, 238-243, 245, 247, 365, 379, 386, 392, 397, 398, 401, 403, 406, 407, 413, 430, 441, 471, 493, 500, 533, 565, 566, 576, 579, 686, 756.

10<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Div., 188, 222, 239, 275, 277, 369, 379, 384, 392, 395, 397, 404, 408, 412, 441.

17<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Div., 170

2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Inf. Div., 369, 379, 386, 387, 392, 395, 398, 400-405, 410, 413, 429, 430, 433, 438, 441, 454, 456, 471, 472, 477, 479, 493, 495, 533, 566, 576, 579, 591-594, 613, 686, 687, 695, 698, 712, 726, 741, 752, 756, 762, 785, 807.

1<sup>st</sup> South Africa Inf. Div., 109, 137, 161, 176, 184, 188, 189, 216, 221-223, 227, 259, 277, 278, 281, 300, 302, 308, 320, 339, 366, 369, 379, 384, 422, 426, 429, 458, 533, 565, 566, 576, 579, 686, 695, 699, 726, 757, 762,

2<sup>nd</sup> South Africa Inf. Div., 67, 137, 161, 175, 188, 191, 222, 239, 244, 277, 302, 317, 320, 379, 471, 4810

6<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Div, 17, 314.

7<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Div, 170

9<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Div , 83, 138, 387, 390, 422, 450, 456, 458, 471, 472, 478, 481, 497, 504, 533, 565, 566, 576, 580, 594, 686, 695, 699, 712, 723, 752, 756, 758, 762, 771, 773, 777, 806, 807.

1<sup>st</sup> French Inf. Div, 250.

2<sup>nd</sup> French Inf. Div, 266, 785, 791-794, 806, 807, 811.

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7<sup>th</sup> support group, 29.

7<sup>th</sup> British Mot. Bd., 137, 188, 191, 205, 206, 213, 215, 218, 250, 252, 256, 270, 283, 304, 345, 384, 385, 392, 395, 400, 403, 404, 426, 429, 430, 434, 441, 456, 493, 566, 576, 579, 582, 587, 600, 687, 697, 728, 730, 762, 764, 768, 785, 792, 793, 804, 807.

1<sup>st</sup> British Arm. Bd., 137, 188, 189, 222, 235, 497.

2<sup>nd</sup> British Arm. Bd., 29, 31, 38, 42, 57, 65, 67, 176, 177, 179, 188, 192, 216, 219, 221, 223, 225, 227, 229, 246-249, 269-272, 274, 275, 460, 476, 477, 480, 493, 495, 496, 497, 507, 509, 510, 687, 697, 699, 712, 729, 730, 743, 762, 764, 765, 785, 792-794, 807, 811.

3<sup>rd</sup> British Arm. Bd., 84.

4<sup>th</sup> British Arm. Bd., 137, 176-179, 188, 192, 206, 211, 213, 215, 217, 218, 221, 223, 225, 227, 229, 240, 248-251, 255, 261, 269-272, 275, 280, 304, 307, 308, 314, 345, 384, 392, 400, 426, 434, 437, 446, 447, 456, 457, 462, 493, 499, 507, 566, 576, 579, 584, 596, 600, 687, 712, 734, 750, 751, 754, 757, 780, 794, 807, 812.

7<sup>th</sup> British Arm. Bd., 17, 283, 392.

8<sup>th</sup> British Arm. Bd., 137, 267, 576, 579, 581, 590, 592-594, 687, 697, 712, 729, 730, 740, 743, 748, 750, 752, 768, 785, 791, 794, 807.

9<sup>th</sup> British Arm. Bd., 687, 694, 698, 726,

740, 741, 743, 750, 762, 785, 786, 790-793.  
 22<sup>nd</sup> British Arm. Bd, 29, 38, 67, 84, 137, 176-179, 188, 191, 192, 213, 215, 216,  
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 23<sup>rd</sup> British Arm. Bd, 492, 493, 496, 504, 533, 580, 581, 592, 594, 686, 694, 699, 712,757,785. 781.  
 24<sup>th</sup> British Arm. Bd, 687, 697, 712, 729, 730,743,748,752,762,764,765,768.  
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 3<sup>rd</sup> Indian Inf. Bd., 83, 137, 177, 188, 191,213, 222, 333, 345, 384, 385, 392, 395, 407.  
 4<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Bd., 29.  
 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Bd., 29, 59, 63, 66, 67, 69, 365, 398, 404, 472, 475, 477, 478, 480, 576, 579, 594, 602, 691, 807, 809.  
 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Bd., 42, 57, 59, 63, 65-67, 691.  
 8<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Bd., 191.  
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 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Bd., 176, 188, 235, 236, 240, 242, 246, 404, 429, 441, 456, 493, 500, 579.  
 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Inf. Bd., 29, 42, 57, 176, 188, 315, 326, 328.  
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 161<sup>st</sup> Indian Inf. Bd., 493, 495, 579, 699.  
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 5<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Inf. Bd., 400, 404, 405, 426, 453, 456, 475-477, 479, 493, 495, 579, 602, 605, 607, 698, 725, 741, 794.  
 6<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Inf. Bd., 392, 426, 429, 441, 476, 493, 495, 579, 591, 602, 604, 605, 607,698,726,741.  
 20<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Bd., 450, 498, 580, 594, 699, 723, 762, 773.  
 24<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Bd., 456, 481, 482, 498-500, 507, 509, 510, 580, 699, 723, 769, 780.  
 26<sup>th</sup> Australian Inf. Bd., 460, 462, 466, 467, 498, 499, 576, 580, 699, 723, 758, 773, 781.  
 1<sup>st</sup> South Africa Inf. Bf., 78, 188, 189, 259, 280, 384, 426, 432, 435, 437, 441, 443, 463, 579, 594, 699, 728.  
 2<sup>nd</sup> South Africa Inf. Bf., 188, 189,259,384,426, 432, 437, 447, 460, 463, 579, 594, 699, 726, 761.  
 3<sup>rd</sup> South Africa Inf. Bf., 188, 189, 259, 384, 426,430,434, 579, 699, 726, 728.  
 4<sup>th</sup> South Africa Inf. Bf., 176, 188, 191, 315, 328-331.  
 5<sup>th</sup> South Africa Inf. Bf., 176, 192.  
 6<sup>th</sup> South Africa Inf. Bf., 176, 188, 191, 315, 329,331.  
 1<sup>st</sup> French Inf. Bd.,58,78, 137, 176, 177, 188, 189, 191, 206, 209, 212, 218, 235, 250, 260, 687, 697, 731, 734, 745, 757.  
 2<sup>nd</sup> French Inf. Bd., 176, 188, 307, 687, 698.  
 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Inf. Bd., 78.  
 1<sup>st</sup> Greek Inf. Bd., 687, 698.

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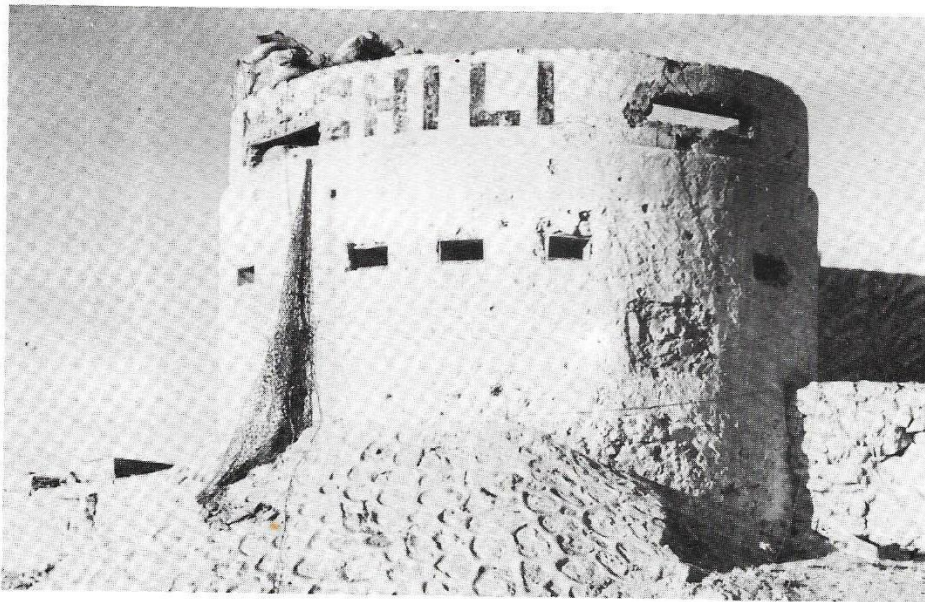
Force Z, 535.

#### Aerial Forces:

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 597, 600, 602, 611, 612, 614, 618, 788, 794.



1. Il forte di Sceleidima.



2. Il forte di El Mechili.

- 1. Fort Sceleidima
- 2. Fort El Mecchili





3. Il gen. Bastico tra la popolazione di Bengasi riconquistata.

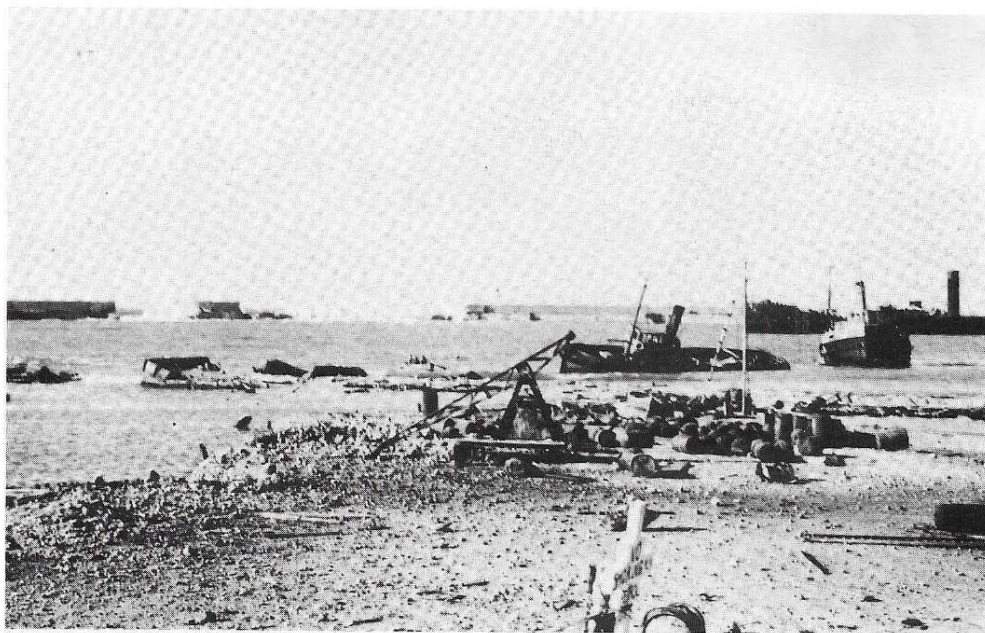


4. Il gen. Bastico visita il porto di Bengasi.

3. Gen. Bastico among the population of Benghazi at the recapture

4. Gen. Bastico visiting the Port of Benghazi





5. Veduta del porto di Bengasi.



6. Da sinistra, i generali Nicolini, Marchesi, Gambara, Bastico, Calvi, Zingales.

5. View of the Port of Benghazi

6. From the *left*, Generals Nicolini, Gambara, Bastico, Calvi, Zingles.





7. Rommel con i generali Gambara e Calvi.



8. Rommel decora con la croce di ferro il gen. Lombardi, comandante della D.f. «Brescia».

7. Rommel with Generals Gambara & Calvi

8. Rommel decorates with the Iron Cross Gen. Lombardi, Commander of the *Brescia*





9. Il gen. Francesco Zingales, comandante del C.A.M. dal gennaio al marzo 1942.



10. Rommel, Cavallero e Barbasetti (fine giugno 1942).

9. General Francesco Zingales Commander of the C.A.M. from January to March 1942

10. Rommel, Cavallero & Barasetti (end of June 1942)



11. Cavallero e Kesselring (fine giugno 1942).



12. Rommel con  
il gen. Azzi durante  
la battaglia di El-Gazala.

11. Cavallero & Kesselring (end of June 1942)  
12. Rommel with Gen. Azzi during the battle of El Gazala.





13. Cavallero con i generali  
von Rintelen e Baldassarre.



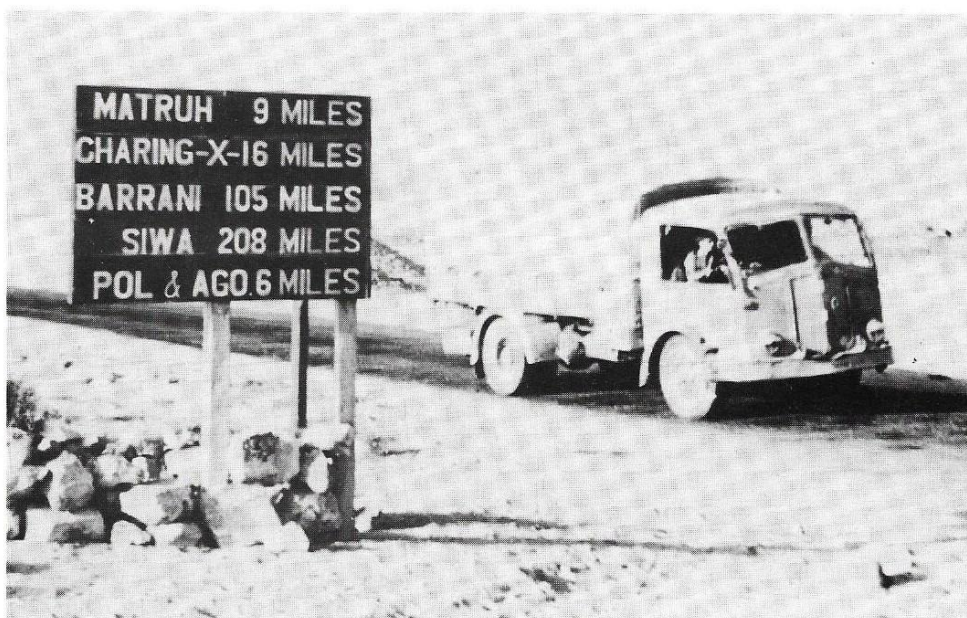
14. La divisione corazzata «Littorio» in movimento verso Tobruk.

13. Cavallero with Gen. Von Rintelen & Baldassarre.

14. The Armored Division "Littorio" in movement toward Tobruk.



15. La divisione corazzata «Ariete» in movimento verso el-Mechili.



16. In Egitto.

15. The Armored Division "Ariete" in movement toward el-Mechili.

16. Into Egypt





17. La depressione di El Qattara.

17. The El Qattara depression



18. Generale Curio Barbasetti di Prun,  
capo della delegazione  
del Comando Supremo.



19. Generale Ettore Baldassarre, comandante  
del XX corpo d'armata dal marzo  
al giugno 1942.

18. General Curio Barbasetti di Prun, Head of the delegation of the Comando Supremo  
19. Gen. Ettore Baldassarre, Commander of the XX Corp from March to July 1942



20. Generale Federico Ferrari Orsi,  
comandante del X corpo d'armata



21. Generale Giuseppe De Stefanis,  
comandante prima della divisione  
corazzata «Ariete» e poi  
del XX corpo d'armata.

20. General Federico Ferrari Orsi, Commander of X Corp.  
21. General Giuseppe De Stefanis, Commander of the "Ariete" & then XX Corp.





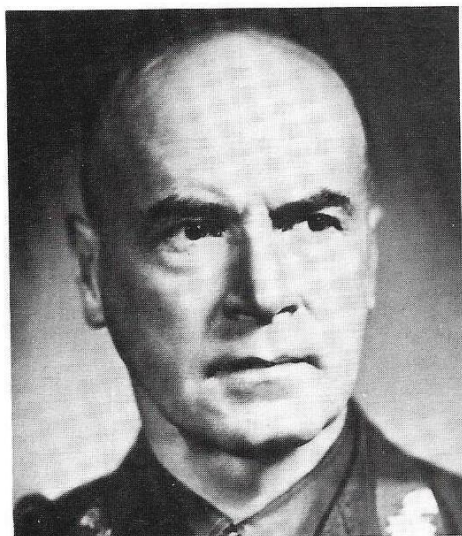
22. Generale Alessandro Gloria comandante della divisione fanteria «Bologna».



23. Generale Edmondo Nebbia, comandante del X corpo d'armata ad El Alamein.

22. General Alessandro Gloria Commander of the "Bologno" Inf. Div.

23. Gen. Edmondo Nebbia commander of X Corp at El Alamein



24. Generale Ludwig Crüwell  
(foto Bundesarchiv).



25. Generale Wilhelm von Thoma  
(foto Bundesarchiv).



26. Generale Walther Nehring  
(foto Bundesarchiv).



27. Generale Georg Stumme  
(foto Bundesarchiv).

24. General Ludwig Crüwell. 25. General Wilhelm von Thoma.  
26. General Walther Nehring. 27. General Georg Stumme

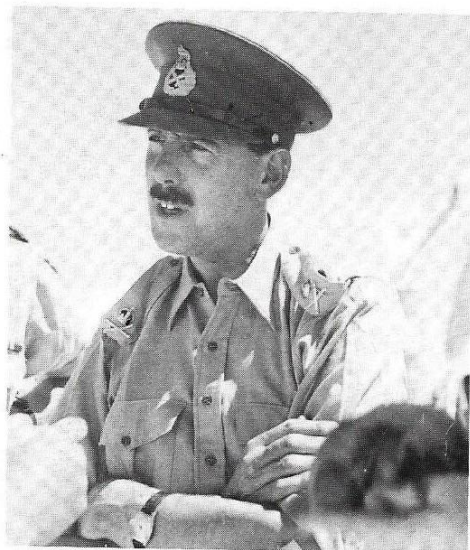




28. Gen. Harold Alexander  
(foto Iwm).



29. Generale Bernard L.  
Montgomery  
(foto Iwm).



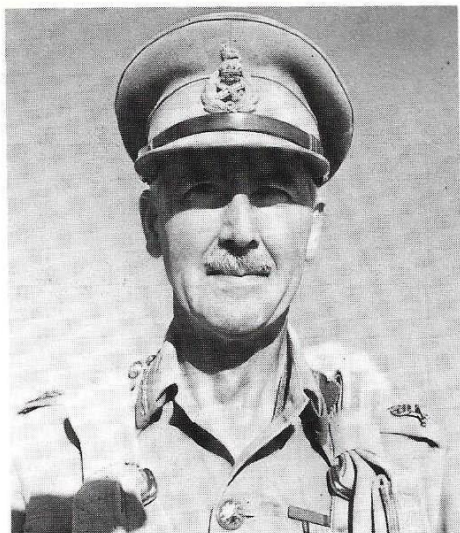
30. Generale Oliver Leese  
(foto Iwm).



31. Generale Neil M. Ritchie  
(foto Iwm).

28. Gen. Harold Alexander  
30. General Oliver Lesse

29. General Bernard L. Montgomery  
31. General Neil M. Ritchie



32. Generale Alan Cunningham  
(foto Iwm).



33. Generale W.H.E. Gott  
(foto Iwm).



34. Generale Brian G. Horrocks  
(foto Iwm).



35. Generale A. Reade Godwin-Austen  
(foto Iwm).

32. General Alan Cunningham  
34. General Brian G. Horrocks

33. General W.H.E. Gott  
35. General A. Reade Godwin-Austen





36. Generale Claude J.E. Auchinleck  
(foto Iwm).



37. Ammiraglio Andrew B. Cunningham  
(foto Iwm).

36. General Claude J.E. Auchinleck  
37. Admiral Andrew B. Cunningham





